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ABSTRACT

For every individual, stories are one of the earliest and most enduring ways of sharing and constructing meaning. Narrative schemes, overt and hidden, are at work in all children's lives as they try to connect new information and concepts with their existing understandings. They are also at work in primary classrooms in ways both small (an individual story told) and large (a community story in process). This book explores the central place of "storying" in classroom learning, considering the power of story as a mean of tapping into fresh understandings of teaching and learning. The book advocates the application of multiple stories, multiple lenses, multiple entry points. It advocates opportunities for learners to make choices about what and how they learn. It promotes an environment in which students find new reasons to learn, new attitudes to learning, and new energy to pursue their learning goals. In particular, it looks at the ubiquity of storying in learners' lives, and its significance as a learning currency; examines the effect of learners' own metanarratives on their literacy success and life chances; looks at stories as existing sets of pragmatic knowledge that students bring to the classroom; sets out the relationship between storying and the inquiry process; shows how stories serve to mediate across human differences; presents ways to establish a "storying classroom" that operates as a collaborative learning community; and offers criteria and techniques for presenting powerful and resistant stories. Some views of learning that inform the book are: ethnography, scaffolding, poststructuralism, social constructivism, and systems theory. Each of the seven chapters includes references. (NKA)

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making meaning in primary classrooms

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What's the story?

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Some terms used in this book

discourse a way of conceiving, doing and expressing that is accepted within a group. Discourses exist within homes, clubs, professions, schools etc. Public discourses often operate implicitly because they reflect the values of the dominant culture. Discourse differs from *metanarrative* in that it is something more than myth or theory; it is something lived and enacted.

essential learnings concepts that are believed to underlie all curriculum. While these concepts vary slightly in nomenclature and in kind from place to place, they capture ideas such as citizenship, communication, futures, identity, independence, social responsibility, technologies and thinking.

metanarrative a 'big-picture' story that acts as a kind of theory. Metanarratives often operate as personal or group myths, and they set a trajectory that is difficult to redirect. Individuals develop powerful metanarratives around their own and others' capabilities; schools develop metanarratives around such things as the character of groups and classes, and the nature of good performance. Individual *stories* often accrete around a metanarrative, serving to 'prove' or reinforce it.

narrative an organising and integrative scheme that enables events, scenes, states of mind and circumstance to be related.

narrative genre the text type of story-telling.

story a particular *narrative* version that is developed and/or related as a way of understanding experience.

storying the process of constructing ideas and/or relating them through *narrative*. Storying is a mode of operation. In this sense, it distinguishes itself from simply 'telling stories'.

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To Nathan, my son – my favourite story.

To the memory of Amber Lee.

To dance. The great thing in life is not so much to dance well, but whether one is willing to dance at all.

To sing, even if you sing off-key. The crow has as much right to a voice as the nightingale.

To tell stories. Those we love are never really gone as long as their stories are told.

> Carmen Agra Deedy (1995) *The Last Dance*.
> Peachtree Publishers, Atlanta.

To Barry Gordon, Editor Extraordinaire, who made sure this story was told.

To all those whose stories I have had the privilege of sharing – thanks.

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Introduction

The real voyage of discovery consists
not in seeking new landscapes, but
in having new eyes.

– **Marcel Proust**

This book explores the power of story as a means of tapping into fresh understandings of teaching and learning. The intention is to look at story not only as narrative but to consider it as *metanarrative* – an ongoing construction that gives sense to our world and our experiences. This book will represent classrooms as places for generating, using, testing, revising and verifying stories.

As children go about their daily business, they infer, predict, anticipate, disconfirm and self-correct the stories they encounter and tell. Students of all ages need to have their stories heard and respected, and they need to be assisted to see the big picture that can be formed by fragments of seemingly incidental knowledge. Stories are the threads that weave the discrete pieces of our existence. Stories hold individual lives together, bond us with fellow human beings and help us to internalise information that would otherwise sit beyond ourselves.

Contemporary research alerts us to the significance of children's home and community discourses – their ways of

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knowing and telling. Moll (1990) points to the 'funds of knowledge' that students may bring into classrooms, only to find that they do not fit within the 'version' that is privileged by the school. Hill et al. (1998) note the many points of disconnection between the home and school learning environments that serve to deny students access to curriculum when they cannot 'play the game' of school.

But when stories connect and new understandings are made, learning is exhilarating. Lewis Thomas (cited in Judson, 1980) says that when the scientist makes a discovery, "he shouts it from his rooftop". When students are empowered to test their stories against those of others and make new connections daily, schools may look more like rooftops then walled-in buildings.

My story

I failed as a learner when I could not make connections. Despite my ability to manoeuvre 'the system' successfully, there are gaping holes in my knowledge and understanding of the world. If my teachers had told me that I could approach historical inquiry from the perspective of fashion, I might have been a history major. But history was about learning dates, distant events, long-ago wars. It seemed irrelevant to a twelve-year-old. And if I had made the link from cos, sin and tan to the pitch of roofs and the design of buildings, I may have pursued maths out of my passion for architecture. Instead, I rote-memorised dates, names, algorithms and formulae and, I have to say, understood very little of their significance. Even so, I was a 'success' of a system that prioritised a certain kind of learning.

Curriculum content has been viewed with a limited lens. It is time to shape learning opportunities so that they capitalise on what all learners know and strive to know. With information technology providing access to so many stories, options and perspectives, there is no excuse for taking one road to one destination. It is time to put the tools of inquiry into the hands of learners. The system, as it is, promotes the *search for an answer* rather than *researching for possibilities*.

About this book

This book will advocate the application of multiple stories, multiple lenses, multiple entry points. It will advocate opportunities for learners to make choices about what and how they learn. It will promote an environment in which students find new reasons to learn, new attitudes to learning, and new energy to pursue their learning goals. In particular, it will:

- look at the ubiquity of storying in learners' lives, and its significance as a learning currency
- examine the effect of learners' own metanarratives on their literacy success and life chances
- look at stories as existing sets of pragmatic knowledge that students bring to the classroom
- set out the relationship between storying and the inquiry process
- show how stories serve to mediate across human differences
- present ways to establish a 'storying classroom' that operates as a collaborative learning community
- offer criteria and techniques for presenting powerful and resistant stories.

It is certainly easier for us as teachers to base program choices on a fixed repertoire of unit topics and strategies than allowing them to be influenced by the experiences of the students and their far-reaching home and community networks. And we *do* have a curriculum to deliver, for which we are held accountable. But when we see curriculum as a web of connected stories, we are forced to look at learning differently. Our professional responsibility lies not in transacting content, but in *enabling* students to gain access to that curriculum, and in *mediating* students' engagements with information so that their learning and concept development are supported. It is in these processes that the power of story lies richly at our disposal.

Some views of learning that inform this book

ethnography a process of understanding meaning and belief by examining interpretations developed in particular cultural sites. In a contemporary sense, critical ethnography aims to look at 'cultural practices' in terms of their relationship to the practices of the dominant culture. This approach can support the positive resistance and/or empowerment of identified groups.

Where does storying fit in?

Critical ethnography recognises that, in practice, societies contain 'webs of meaning'. In the classroom, stories help to uncover the lenses through which individual students interpret experience. Storying provides a mode for identifying students' starting points, and the family/community metanarratives that inform their understandings. It also provides a non-threatening mode that enables students to come into contact with perspectives that enrich and challenge their own.

poststructuralism something of a blanket term for critical theory that follows from the key ideas of *structuralism*: that language can be viewed as a set of texts; that texts emerge out of cultural discourses and conventions; that these discourses and conventions privilege or value certain representations as though they are natural. Poststructuralist readings aim to deconstruct or lay bare the ways in which these processes operate within a text.

Where does storying fit in?

Stories embed and privilege world views. A 'sense of story' is therefore a precursor to a critical awareness of the self and of texts – a recognition that when people communicate, they are circulating representations, or versions, of experience.

scaffolding the process in which learning is supported by more expert others. Scaffolding follows from *social constructivist* ideas by situating learning as a socially mediated process that recognises the important roles of the teacher, student peers and others in helping learners to gain control over concepts or skills that they could not attain alone.

Where does storying fit in?

Storying is arguably the most powerful and universal means of mediating between those who have attained an understanding and those who are seeking to. It is a natural mode of interaction for students, promoting small-group inquiry, sharing and teacher explanation.

social constructivism working from the constructivist view that learners construct their own knowledge, this view of learning holds that knowledge is constructed socially before being realised internally. It recognises that knowledge is sited in particular social situations, and that teachers and learners negotiate knowledge through interactions. This view gives rise to the idea that learners should be 'learning how to learn' at the same time as they are learning aspects of content.

Where does storying fit in?

See under *scaffolding*.

structuralism see *poststructuralism*.

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systems theory a standpoint that approaches phenomena in terms of organisation or relations rather than the discrete parts that make a whole. Systems theory recognises that real systems are open to interaction that permits evolutionary change.

Where does storying fit in?

A systems approach demands relational description. For example, the function of the human body cannot be satisfactorily represented by identifying its organs. It must be *narrated* as a dynamic interaction between inputs, processes, boundaries, modifications, outputs etc.

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Hill, S et al. (1998) *One Hundred Children Go to School.* Commonwealth Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, Canberra.

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1

Why storying matters

The mind is a narrative device: we run on stories. Stories unite all worlds. It is the compelling nature of stories and their telling that impacts on how we relate to each other, how we define who we are, and how and what we learn. Stories are an entry point for meaning-making – a place where learning and life merge. Stories contribute to our development as whole, coherent human beings.

The introduction to this book introduces the idea of story as *metanarrative* – something that threads between the many separate fragments of information and experience that we encounter (and, as learners, attempt to process). Human beings are constantly *storying* – forming and reforming understandings, consciously and unconsciously, that represent a version of being, of knowing, of reality, of truth.

Storying is something that goes beyond the notion of story-*telling*. We tend to limit the use of the word story-telling because of the association made to fiction. Indeed, we might use the phrase "You're just telling stories" to reprove the child who is inventing or 'making up' reality. But while any story is indeed a *version* – with embedded biases, emphases, points of view – it is important to recognise that storying is an everyday mode that is used to explain, justify and prove. The items that make up our daily news are called stories, and we recognise the critical importance of these stories for interpreting reality.

It's for this reason that, when we land upon the culmination of an incident, we might ask: "What's the story?". In posing such a question, we are not invoking imagination or fantasy. We are recognising that story has the power to explain and enlighten. It has the power to link cause and effect, to sequence and order ideas, and to provide commentary that illuminates events and actions. In other words, story provides a mechanism for finding out, and for understanding, that recommends itself as a powerful relational mode for the classroom teacher and her/his students.

Sir Peter Medawar, a Nobel Prize winner for his investigations of immunological tolerance, explains that scientists are "building explanatory structures telling stories which are scrupulously tested to see if they are stories of real life" (cited in Judson, 1980:3). Across the many stories we experience, we search for the patterns that connect. We constantly sift through the stories we hear looking for clues that inform, affirm or disconfirm our evolving beliefs about life and learning.

Any story is a particular narrative representation, and the word *narrative* can be traced back to an original meaning of 'to know'. Roland Barthes (1966) defines narrative in a way that entices us to appreciate its centrality in our lives.

> *... in the first place the word 'narrative' covers an enormous variety of genres which are themselves divided up between different subjects, as if any material was suitable for the composition of the narrative: the narrative may incorporate articulated language, spoken or written; pictures still or*

> *moving, gestures and the ordered arrangement of all the ingredients: it is present in myth, legend, fable, short story, epic, tragedy, comedy, pantomime, painting ... cinema, comic strips, journalism, conversation. In addition, under this almost infinite number of forms, the narrative is present at all times, in all places, in all societies; the history of narrative begins with the history of mankind; there does not exist, and never has existed, a people without narratives (cited in Polkinghorne, 1988:14).*

Stories provide a framework for interpreting the past and a system for anticipating the future. According to Genishi and Dyson (1994:243), "Stories help us construct our selves who used to be one way and are now another, stories help to make sense of, evaluate, and integrate the tensions inherent in experience: the past with the present, the fictional with the 'real', the official with the unofficial, the personal with the professional, the canonical with the different or unexpected. Stories help us transform the present and shape the future for our students and ourselves so that it will be richer or better than the past."

Stories allow relationships between events, objects and action to be forged. Amaro and Moreira (2001) make the point that narrative *invents the plot that chains things and events*, internal and external, and, because of that, it tends to select and articulate the personal and social paradigms that make daily life. The telling of stories is fundamental to our development and begins at around age two. Studies by Gee (1996) and Labov (1970) show that the vast majority of children enter school with large vocabularies, complex grammar and deep understandings of experiences and stories. We need to capitalise on this often-ignored potential that resides in story and storying as a valuable teaching tool.

Clearly, it is at the point where the learner connects his/her story to curriculum that learning has relevance, and meaning results. This is illustrated by Judson's (1980:2) example.

> *A mathematician friend of mine remarked the other day that his daughter, aged eight, had just stumbled without his teaching onto the fact that some numbers are prime numbers – those like 11 or 19 or 37 or 1,023 that cannot be divided by any other integer (except trivially, by 1). "She called them 'unfair' numbers", he said, "and when I asked her why they were unfair, she told me, 'Because there is no way to share them out evenly'." What delighted him most was not her charming turn of phrase nor her equitable turn of mind but – as a mathematician – the knowledge that the child had experienced a moment of pure scientific perception.*

Here the learner has connected the complex mathematical concept of prime numbers by embedding it in a story that relates to life experience – the experience of sharing lollies with friends. So it is that story connects learners, teachers and curriculum.

This book does not locate narrative as one single *learning genre* but as a way of tapping into the multiple stories that reside in a range of diverse genres. Harold Rosen (1987:6) amplifies this idea.

> *We have straight-jacketed ourselves in believing stories are not to be trusted or, at the every least, do not have a legitimate role to play in learning. All abstractions are rooted in the tissue of human experience ... What is geology but a vast story which geologists have been composing and revising throughout the existence of their subject? Indeed, what has the recent brouhaha about evolution been but two stories competing for the right to be the authorised version, the authentic story? ... There are stories wherever we turn ... Every chemical reaction is a story compressed into the straightjacket of an equation.* ►

Story, in the sense of this book, provides the means for phenomena to be located within the conceptual repertoire of the learner. In approaching the water cycle, for example, story might serve to:

- locate the process of the water cycle as an extension of other things that the learner knows about
- present an analogy between the water cycle and other known processes
- stage a setting for the occurrence and outcomes of the water cycle
- link the water cycle to real-life needs such as drinking water, environmental sustainability, crop irrigation
- relate the water cycle to learners' personal experiences and observations.

Perhaps more significantly, the notion of storying supports *critical* inquiry by framing investigations in ways that encourage comparative analysis. For example, learners appreciate that scientific or historical axioms begin as *propositions* that have been authored and tested. History takes its proper place as a kind of sanctioned versioning that is open to continuous challenge and revision. This leads students to value the importance of posing their own questions. Questions not only give impetus to students' investigations, they serve as a means of challenging and authenticating versions.

A storying classroom is therefore an inquiring classroom where learners ask: Who says? Why? What do others say? Such a classroom serves the ambitions of the new approaches to curriculum, underpinned by essential learnings. These new approaches recognise that there are 'big-picture' issues, running across learning areas, that have to do with students *making connections* – asking themselves what their learning means for themselves and their world, now and in the future; posing questions and considering consequences; and communicating their evolving understandings.

When they carry a sense of story, students and their teachers have this kind of orientation to curriculum content. Through story, teachers invite learners (and learners invite one another) to:

- locate themselves in relation to a topic
- relate the topic to other things they know
- speculate and predict about what information and implications might emerge from the topic
- investigate the topic to test, verify and reformulate their speculations and predictions
- relate the synthesised information to others
- reflect on what they have discovered and experienced.

Looking back over this sequence, it may be seen that it is not unlike the process people might go through when they hear about a new movie, see the movie and share the experience with others. It might also be apparent that this sequence reflects key phases of the learning cycle in the collaborative classroom. That is, satisfying learning has a *narrative* quality: engaging the learner; prompting questions; presenting information that can be 'worked with' or interpreted; leading to new understanding; and prompting retelling and reflection.°

Where do stories come from?

Stories are created quite naturally as we make sense of, and attach meaning to, events in our lives (Abma, 1999; Chase, 1995; Connelly & Clandinin, 2000). We are surrounded by stories. The telling of stories is a cumulative process: one story generates many. Complete strangers connect when they

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° A valuable description of the learning cycle in the small-group classroom is provided in the PETA book *Managing Small Group Learning* (Reid, J et al., 2002).

share stories. We are programmed to listen for the link that connects another's story with our own. Stories take on an almost infinite number of forms as tellers and interpreters work in tandem to create pathways.

Our professional storytellers believe that stories are everywhere. Says R L Stine: "I'll just be walking Nadine [Stine's dog] through the park and a name or idea will pop up and I'll just work from there". Mem Fox points to "real life and books" as sources. John Marsden finds 'small' stories within big stories: "You tell the story of Cyclone Tracey by telling the story of a couple of individuals or families".

Often, stories encounter challenge or resistance. Following an argument with a colleague, Pennycook (1994:116) observed that "from one point of view, we were participants in the *same discourse* (the same conversation), while from the other we were each taking up positions in *different discourses* – different ways of understanding". Much the same observation could be made of classrooms: students are taken into one privileged discourse – the one approved by the system, school and teacher – but they approach that discourse with attitudes that may vary from participation, to consent, to indifference, to outright opposition.

Jerome Harste recalls reading with great gusto his first published children's book to a crowded hall of young children, parents and teachers. During his story-telling, he was somewhat distracted by a young child who was gallantly (despite teacher protests) crawling over students to get closer to the front. Feeling rather proud at the effect of his rendition, Jerome completed the story and asked if there were any questions. Predictably, the young boy – now almost sitting on Jerome's right foot – raised his hand. "Yes", said Jerome, "what is it that you need to ask me?" The child replied: "Man, I just want to know what happened to *your* nose?". Despite our best intentions and purposeful demonstrations, listeners freely choose the story with which they engage.

All children come to school adept at certain 'ways with words' which I would refer to as sets of stories that define who they are and what they know. Students know how to generate stories; they live in the world of stories and need opportunities to build on what they already know and understand. However, in the school context, they are faced with learning new 'ways with words' – a set of school stories. The context of the school predetermines which stories they will tell, and how they will be told. Students quickly learn which stories are valued, shunned or ignored. The verbal abilities that tend to preclude children from success at school are tied to specific school-based practices and school-based genres of oral and written language (Gee, 1996).

We are all stories waiting to be told.

Gee (1992) makes the point that we are each different 'kinds' of people – have different identities – in different social situations. The situations that allow for all of this multiplicity are not 'neutral' states of the world, but socially and culturally different ways of looking at, making sense of, and being in the world. And it needs to be said: *schools are not 'neutral' or 'fair' states of the world.* They are very particular places, deeply embedded with conventions and presumptions about childhood, about learning, about community, about relationships, about power, and so on. However, with teacher support, schools do remain sites of opportunity where individuals may participate in new stories that develop their self-concept and their concepts of the world.

Stories are generated when we:

- start conversations
- forge relationships
- transcend barriers
- instruct
- connect with others
- share experiences
- communicate empathy and understanding
- generate new ideas
- develop communities
- alter the way we think
- touch the heart of others.

All of these processes are synonymous with teaching.

Activities for the teacher

- What events in your life have generated stories that you enjoy sharing? When you recall these stories, what are the details that you are surprised that you remember – the sensory details, the sequence of events, the characters, the setting? How many times do you think you have told and retold the same story? How have you adjusted the story for particular audiences? What signs did you look for to assess whether or not the audience had responded to your story?
- What stories do you choose not to tell? Why? How did you determine not to tell them?

Activities for students: Generating stories

Activity 1

Story starters

In pairs or groups, students take turns to add a sentence to a story that starts with:

I knew it was him the minute I laid eyes on him.

I got an uneasy feeling when ...

It came at me from behind the closed door.

Sh! I tried hard not to be heard.

I was having trouble going to sleep when ...

I opened the front door to ...

Shark! Shark! I heard the frantic call.

Our teacher was away and ...

It seemed so great to be able to ...

Ever since I was a child I have been able to ...

People were so kind to me after ...

I opened my grandmother's trunk to find ...

Far away and just as long ago ...

I want to tell you the story of ...

I looked into the mirror and I was invisible. I thought I would spend the day ...

My life as a shoe took me ...

Something brushed past my leg as I sat at the table. When I looked down I noticed that ...

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Activity 2

Narrative ping-pong

- Before starting this activity, explain that the story to unfold is about a journey. The story should be about two people or creatures who are friends but part company. They each pursue different life experiences and, through a series of different events and circumstances, end up finding each other again. They renew their friendship.
- In pairs, students sit facing each other with knees touching. One person in the pair starts the story. After 30 seconds they are told to 'switch', and the other person takes up the story from where it left off by starting with 'and'. The story continues to be passed backwards and forwards. (Alternatively, students might use a new sequencing word with each cycle, e.g. 'Next', 'After that', 'Because', 'Once', 'Now that', 'Eventually', 'At last'.)

Activity 3

Stop, say and away

In small groups, one student begins by telling a story. At any point, the members of the group can interrupt the teller to ask for clarification. The teller should be given ample time for the story to gain momentum before the interruptions occur. For example, *Jenny took her dog to the vet.* Interruption: *What kind of dog did Jenny have?* After three interruptions, the story moves to the next person in the group.

✳ Activity 4

The main event

- Students rule three columns and have three minutes per column to brainstorm individually:
  - all the people they know
  - all the places that they have ever visited
  - the important events in their lives.
- Students circle one important event that they are willing to share with another person. In pairs, students turn to face each other and sit knee to knee. (This is important because it contains the conversation within a confined space and demonstrates respect for the story and the teller.) Students elect to be a Person 1 or Person 2. In each pair, Person 2 goes first and has three minutes to talk about the selected event. If Person 2 runs out of things to say, s/he continues to talk about other things on the list. Person 1 must not interrupt or ask questions. Person 1's role is to listen.
- After three minutes, call 'Switch'. Person 1 tells his/her story in the same way.
- Ask:
  - What did you learn from that experience? What was most difficult: listening or talking? Why?
  - Was it hard not to ask questions? Why?
  - What happens when you stop listening and ask questions? (Explain that when the listener asks questions, *ownership* of the story changes.)
  - How were you reassured that your story was being heard?
- Students write a recount of the experience they shared.

- Ask: what feelings, smells, tastes, sights and sounds did you recall?

Activity 5

Finding their stories

www.behindthename.com/

Students find the etymology and history of their first names.

Activity 6

Naming your story

http://educ.ahsl.arizona.edu/mla/doctor.htm

This website is a collection of names that are strangely appropriate to the career or interest pursued (e.g. dental surgeons Fangman, Fillmore, Pullen and Crownover). Students could collect or invent names that match careers/ interests.

Activity 7

Name it what you will: Names on cars

http://www-chaos.umd.edu/misc/origplates.html

Look at how other people name their stories. Personalised number plates tell a story: what number plate would you choose for your car? (Examples include I81B4U; ITXLR8S, as seen on a Porsche; HNSOFF, as seen on a Ferrari.) Students could collect or invent unusual number plates, and decide on the most appropriate cars on which to display them.

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2

Personal metanarratives: What learners tell themselves

Adults are able to articulate their stories of literacy learning in powerful ways. By hearing their stories we are in a position to see how certain kinds of internal talk – personal metanarratives – are established from a young age as learners theorise about themselves, their literacy capabilities and their performance in relation to others. It is apparent that personal metanarratives can become 'self-fulfilling prophecies', since they set a trajectory for literacy success.

We construct ourselves through stories that we encounter, interpret and devise. Our experiences in the school years are imprinted in the form of stories. Many of those stories cluster around an idea of self – a theory about who we are in the world.

My classroom practices have been greatly influenced by stories from adults that I have been privileged to hear. These

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stories reveal a lot about missed opportunities in our classrooms, and they highlight the point that the longer a problem exists, the more layers learners add to their stories of failure. These stories also emphasise that what we do in the name of teaching is imprinted upon learners, particularly when it is associated with failure.

I have sat and listened to adults' literacy stories in gaols, remand centres, drug-rehabilitation centres and reading centres. It is apparent to me that these stories hold the keys to their literacy outcomes. *Learners have the right to be heard*, and the ways in which teachers respond are crucial.

Joe's story

The plumber has his hands fixed on a plug that is holding back the gurgling, dirty water from the unit above. I visualise the impending mess, smell the stench of decayed drain matter, and watch as grey-colourless things find their way to our side of the plug. But right now, of all times, Joe asks that I hear his story. As long as he holds onto that plug, it is a privilege to listen.

Joe explains that four years ago, his wife died unexpectedly. So it was that he had to learn to be the sole caregiver of two small children. To this point, he could not read. He now realised that without his wife, his family's survival depended upon him reading. He recalls being in Year 4 the day he was called to the front of the class to read aloud from a nineteenth-century novel. There, in front of his peers, his face became hotter, his muscles locked and he came to the verge of tears. He couldn't do it.

Thirty-six years later and dealing with my drain crisis, Joe stands with that same look – red face, tears welling, voice quivering. Here is a successful plumbing and electrical contractor living in the body of an adult but out of the experience of a nine-year-old. His engagements with print are not driven by what he sees on the page, but by the humiliation that he relives every time he reminds himself he can't read. Joe has good reasons for not engaging with print. He is caught. While he remains bound to his story, literacy success will elude him.

The trap

Illiterate adults are trapped in personal metanarratives of failure – failure as learners, as readers and writers and, all too often, as people. The irony is that their layered stories also protect them from engaging in literacy-related tasks. It is like trying to learn to swim while sitting on the side of the pool justifying why you should not get wet. In the same way the reluctant swimmer does not take risks and play at swimming, illiterate adults do not play or engage with literacy. They don't sit at the breakfast table and read the cereal packet, or read from the magazine stand while waiting in the check-out line. These things are reminders of failure, not activities to be enjoyed. For these people, reading has to be redefined.

Starting points with struggling learners

A number of PETA publications have identified the importance of questioning for extending talk, for establishing a language for talking about language, and for scaffolding concept development. Questioning can do more than support development *towards* a learning goal; it can move the learner *away* from failure. The questions below represent a first movement along this trajectory; they put aspects of the learner's literacy metanarrative 'out there' in a space within which it can be renegotiated, revised, retold. They can help teachers to gain insights into how to help struggling learners.

The questions serve two purposes. Firstly, the information can be used to make curriculum decisions that are geared towards learners' needs; secondly, in sharing responses to these questions, the struggling reader begins to put some distance between the events associated with failure and their emotional response.

1. Why do you want to learn to read and write?
2. What do you remember about learning to read and write?
3. What is your earliest memory of reading?
4. Did you get help at home? If so, what help was given?
5. How do you cope when you have to read and write?
6. What do you do when you come to a word you don't know?
7. Who is the best reader you know? Why?
8. What do you think of yourself as a reader?
9. What have you done in the past to help yourself learn?
10. Have you discovered something that you would like to read?

Identifying goals

I WANT TO READ STUFF ABOUT FARMING.
TRY "MR. GRUMPY GOES BANANAS"
I'M INTO TREE CLIMBING
HAVE YOU READ "MR. GRUMPY GOES BANANAS"?

One size doesn't fit all ...

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The questions opposite identify the conceptions and misconceptions that learners often have about what it means to be a reader and writer. Learners need a *purpose* to pursue what they want to know (Question 1). They have to want to learn. They have to see that what they seek fulfils a need in their lives, and they have to feel safe and supported to take the risk to move into unchartered territory. Understanding why struggling readers make the choices they do is paramount.

Twenty years ago I was guilty of attempting to redirect the goals and ambitions of the struggling reader. When Dianne mentioned she would like to go to university, I may have responded with "Have you thought about TAFE? Or getting your school certificate?" When Thomas wanted to read *The Man from Snowy River*, I may have responded with "Mmm ... that means you must like the bush. Let's look at another book." I have realised that learners' goals are sacrosanct and they need to be treasured, celebrated and scaffolded rather than controlled. As the teacher, I have to find the creative path and see opportunities in what learners value. Learners need support to get where they want to go. The challenge is in finding the way. To pave Thomas' way, I read aloud and taped *The Making of Phar Lap*. He read along with the story during his lunch break. I walked with Dianne to the admissions office and collected brochures about enrolling in university programs. We started reading them together.

The important thing is not to negate the goal of the learner but to *negotiate* a way to achieve success. While you cannot *make* the learner successful, there are ways to support all learners to move in the direction of success. It is an issue of trusting learners to know what is right and achievable. As their efforts are guided, learners need opportunities to make choices. Ask questions that allow choice while setting the parameters of support – questions such as "Would you like me to tape the story or would you rather we read along together?" or "Would you like me to find a mentor to read this with you?".

that"; "Why would you choose this?". Comments such as "This is a great book – I would enjoy reading it myself" or "How did you know to select this one?" reinforce that they can be responsible for making sound learning decisions. Scaffolding the learner into the text is the craft of all good teachers.

Tom's misconceptions about the reading and writing processes meant that he fixated on one word at a time and gave up in frustration. He needed to get each isolated piece of text 'right' the first time. Unravelling the misconceptions he had about reading, writing and what it meant to be a learner was an essential component of the teaching process. In other words, Tom needed to know more *about* literacy – what it meant to be literate.

Tom learned to read. A month after he'd ceased working with me, I phoned him to find out how he was getting on. He said he now realised that "it was not the books that were stopping me. It was the bloke holding onto them." That was a pretty powerful and enabling insight! But it was also a bit harsh. Tom had been positioned as a failure because he had seen reading only as code-cracking. Tom needed support so that he could see other ways to relate to texts. Luke and Freebody (1990) identified four roles in which readers operate – code-breaker, text participant, text user and text analyst – and learners should be encourage to operate in each of these ways.

The final questions are aimed at putting control into the learner's hands. All learners experience *points of success*, however temporary, that they can be encouraged to recall and build upon (Question 9). And most learners can identify a *focus* – a text that may relate to a personal goal, an interest, a change in life circumstances – for improving their reading (Question 10).

Lessons for the primary classroom

It is fortunate that children are generally more willing and able than adults to shed stories of failure and replace them with stories of success. Finding the trigger for literacy success is essential. It starts with listening to, and coming to know, the students with whom we work. Shannon, Year 1, taught me this.

Shannon's story

Shannon resisted writing. He never wrote much more than one sentence in sustained silent writing time. He knew enough about the writing process and sound-symbol relationships to do more, but he was always busy, fussing with his pencil, looking for his book, changing pages and starting again. After observing him for a period of three weeks, I decided to change my tactic. I challenged him for not getting his work done, and he stayed behind to continue his writing. Fifteen minutes later (and beaming), he produced a page of writing and announced gallantly, "You know, when I grow up, I think I will be Roald Dahl".

Prior to this revelation, Shannon had not engaged in writing, he had engaged in coping strategies. Shannon needed to engage with, rather than be preoccupied with ways to avoid, writing. I needed to find a way to support his efforts. Knowing how to do this varies from learner to learner. Shannon needed a space free from distraction – a space in which he felt both challenged and supported. It was in the *act of writing* that he discovered what it meant to be a writer. He not only wrote, he changed his ideas about what it means to be a writer. In the act of writing, he wrote himself into the book of great authors alongside Roald Dahl – a memorable accomplishment for a six-year-old, and a moment worth celebrating.

Setting a new trajectory

Learning changes when old stories do not predetermine how things are done and should be done in the future. Kim's story below reminds us that a new orientation to learning can be triggered by situating learners within the larger narratives, beyond the school, that contextualise their lives.

Kim's story

When Mrs Gillespie came to me with her daughter Kim, she was at her wit's end. She had taken Kim to the optometrist, the doctor, the hearing specialist. She had completed a five-week parent in-service course on how to help her child with reading and writing. But Kim (9) was not reading.

I asked Kim to read from a simple text, well supported by illustrations. She stumbled along, making very few connections to the words on the page and completely ignoring the illustrations. I then asked her to write. She wrote a series of random letters with no logical sound-symbol relationships and no recognisable word patterns. I was baffled.

The following week, I asked Kim to write familiar words so that I could establish her knowledge of phonics. I asked her to write 'school'. She wrote 'prmv'. I asked her to try again. She responded with 'scoll'. I asked her to write a number of other words and she went through the same routine: her first attempts bore no similarity to the word, but when asked again she wrote recognisable approximations. I asked her to read. She started off making no sense of the text. I asked her to start again and to do it properly. She did.

I left Kim to continue to write while I went to find Mrs Gillespie waiting in another room. "Who told her she's dumb?" I asked. Hesitantly, Mrs Gillespie explained: "Kim's father always tells her she's stupid." She looked distressed and frustrated as she continued: "She has a very bright younger sister who's invited to everything. No one wants to do anything with her. Kim's always left behind."

Kim's reading problem did not reside in the squiggles on the page but in a personal and familial metanarrative that positioned her as dumb, rejected and not good enough. Kim had never experienced success at anything. There was no reason for her to attempt to succeed at literacy.

Mrs Gillespie agreed to enrol Kim in Little Athletics – something that Kim's sister was not interested in. She developed a photo album of Kim's events and new-found friends. Together, they made captions for the photos and built up a series of texts around the thing that Kim could feel good about. Kim now had a reason to engage in literacy, and success was imminent.

How can we help children like Kim?

- Start with talk. Find out what the learner's interests are, what hobbies they have, where they like to visit.
- Explain how reading works. Demonstrate the strategies that good readers use when they come to words they don't know. When blocked, good readers:
  - read on
  - read back
  - skip over the word and gather more information
  - guess
  - look for clues in words – first letters, last letters, shape of the word, little words within big words.

  Most importantly, they know that what is written on the page must make sense.
- Build up a series of stories dictated by the learner. These are the best reading material for the struggling reader because they already have an interest in, and are familiar with, the topic.

- Visit the library together and allow the learner to choose. Discuss the books selected.
- Look for creative ways to support the reading of the selected texts:
    - Tape the story.
    - Read it together.
    - Take turns to read one page each – this way, if meaning is lost it will be restored in the reading of the next page.
    - Seek help from parents that is non-threatening and supportive. Suggest books that the parent can read aloud to the learner chapter-by-chapter. It is essential that reading becomes a pleasurable and shared experience – not a 'test, skill and drill' lesson every time a book is opened.
    - Demonstrate the *neurological impress method* to parents. The learner sits next to the reader so that the text is accessible. The reader reads aloud with the learner following along, parrot fashion. The reader does not point to isolated words but points across each line in the direction of the print. The reading should not be stilted or artificial. Discuss illustrations and text features that are interesting. Everything about the reading process is being modelled and demonstrated in this simple technique.
    - Start scrapbooks of poems, paintings, bumper stickers, postcards, song lyrics, celebrity profiles. Use this as reading material.

How can we help children like Tom?

Recall that Tom (p 27) held a basic misconception about reading: he approached every word as a 'test', and if he struck a word that he couldn't decode, he ground to a halt and judged his reading to be a failure. Like Tom, children hold misconceptions about the reading process. Many of these misconceptions are similar to that of Tom. Others are quite different. When in Year 4, Jamie explained that his Year 2 teacher had told him to skip any big words that he didn't know. Jamie was now applying this approach quite rigidly. That meant that when Jamie read, he left out most of the text! He had no access to any other clues – in fact, he became fearful of big words. Sarah, on the other hand, held different misconceptions. When she read aloud, Sarah enunciated the punctuation marks as she read. No one had told her how punctuation functioned, and that readers use it as a reading cue rather than notations to be read aloud.

Talking to learners about what they do when they come to words they do not know is the key to unlocking misconceptions. Collaborative cloze is one way of demonstrating the reading process and how the cueing systems work.

collaborative cloze

Take a short piece of text and eliminate no more than every fourth word by substituting the missing word with a line. Leave the first sentence intact so that the readers have a context. Fables, readily available on the Internet, are an excellent source of meaningful short stories. Enlarge the text so that it fills an A5 sheet of paper. In groups of three, students fill the blanks with a meaningful word. The conversations that take place while attempting to complete the task are as important as the task itself. As students discuss options and read the text aloud, they are demonstrating to each other how the reading process works. On completion, students discuss their supplied words and look at possible alternatives on the basis of maintaining meaning rather than being judged correct or incorrect.

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Activities for the teacher

Identify a struggling reader. How well do you know this learner? Ask yourself:

- What do you know about this learner's home background?
- What are the learner's interests?
- What does s/he know and understand about the reading process?
- How does s/he feel about her/himself as a reader?
- What reasons does s/he have for learning to read?

Activities for students

Activity 1

Pic a story

Photos are a great source for stories. Learners bring in one photo of themselves and, to a partner, describe this snapshot of their lives – a kind of oral caption. These descriptions can be transcribed and photocopied along with the photos to compile a class scrapbook. Digital cameras and scanners are a great incentive for creating stories about the everyday classroom events: 'On Monday, Sara ..., On Tuesday, Kahlil and Magda ...'.

Activity 2

A school story

Read aloud *Hooray for Diffendoofer Day* (Seuss, Prelutsky & Smith, 1999). Discuss 'What makes a good school good?'. Draw a T chart. On one side, list anything that could be done to make yours a good school. On the other side of the T, list practical things that could be started immediately.

Activity 3

Putting poetry where it needs to go

- With the students, identify the 'waiting' places around the school – for example, outside the library, outside the principal's office, next to the computer lab. Select four to six of the most frequently used waiting places. Place poetry there. The poetry should be selected by the students and written in such a way that those waiting can read it easily. Establish a routine so that the poetry is changed at least every two weeks.
- Bulk-borrow a whole range of poetry books and have a poetry feast. Give students time to read poetry, copy poems that they discover and make a class anthology of poems that are loved. Provide opportunities for students to read poems from their books to each other.

The following activities are designed to provide learners with enjoyable ways through which they can connect information or processes with their own lives.

Activity 4

One quick way to change your story

www.anagramgenius.com/server.html

Students type in their names and the letters are reorganised to reveal an anagram. (Some examples: William Shakespeare – I am a weakfish speller; the Morse code – Here come the dots; dormitory – dirty room.)

Activity 5

Computer-generated haiku

http://www.familygames.com/features/humor/haiku.html

A site with more than 12 million possible haikus. With the click of a button, new haikus appear. Students can select the one that best represents their thoughts and feelings, then respond with their own haiku following the 5, 7, 5 syllable format.

Activity 6

Who are you? Phone spell

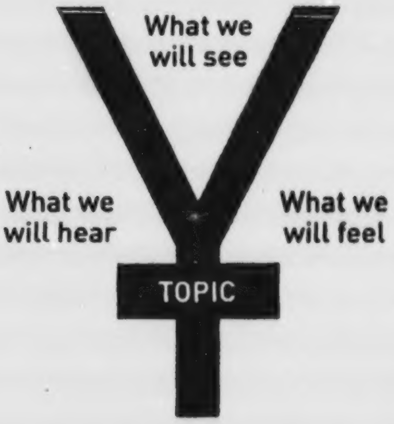
www.phonespell.org/phoneSpell.html

Students type in their phone numbers and find out what their phone number spells in words and phrases.

Activity 7

Y charts

Completing a Y chart allows students to relate to the sensory details of an event or experience. In threes or individually, students reflect on an experience or event. Using the three Y sectors, they list what they will *hear*, what they will *feel* and what they will *see* in relation to the topic investigated.



Activity 8

Multiple voice

Read along with multiple copies of the same text. Struggling readers can relax and enjoy the story as it unfolds without the apprehension that they will be unable to read the very text that might be of interest them.

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3

'I get it': Building a sense of story

As teachers, one of the key drivers that we assign to texts of all kinds is purpose. Students come to understand that texts are *mindful* constructions, and they come to expect that texts have a point (or points) that they have to 'get'. Readers 'get' texts when they make connections to things known or experienced. And nothing can foster connectedness better than what I will call 'a sense of story'.

Gordon Wells' (1986) seminal study of children's language learning and use draws attention to the links between storying and school success. The study outlines that the essential ingredient for literacy development is consistent exposure to stories in the home and classroom environments.

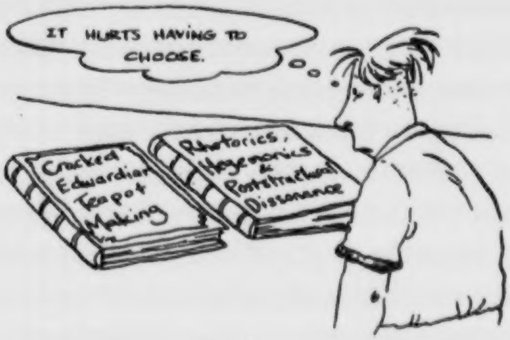
Kortner (1988) points out that "... sharing stories can give youngsters more of a sense of story – an awareness that can help them in both reading and writing. In reading, for example, a sense of story can help children to predict and know what to expect, and to read with more awareness of cause and effect, sequence, and other story factors related to comprehension". For all readers, young or old, reading has to make sense. Readers have to be able to connect with the many and varied texts found in a literate society. The pragmatic knowledge children draw on when making sense of texts is informed by the stories they have heard, told and lived. These stories relate to:

- self-experience
- knowledge of the world
- knowledge of texts.

Exploring students' pragmatic knowledge

The information drawn from these three sources is at the root of comprehension. Just mastering the *mechanics* of reading (including grapho-phonic, semantic and syntactic cuing systems) does not ensure that readers comprehend. The process does not begin and end with what the eyes see (or the fingers touch). Readers must be able to *connect* their experiences with the text.

When readers fail to connect with texts, they are left confused and frustrated. They go into coping mode and look elsewhere for answers. It is not because they can't read, or that the text lacks meaning; the text is meaningless because they fail to link what they are attempting to read with what they bring to the reading situation. It is not necessarily a 'reading problem', but a situation that reflects a limited experience of the topic. We are all illiterate in something. If what we attempt to read exists outside our experience, we need to be scaffolded into it. Try reading a specialist medical journal, a car maintenance guide or a knitting pattern without prior knowledge of these topics – it is like reading a foreign language.


IT HURTS HAVING TO CHOOSE.
Cracked Edwardian Teapot Making
Rhetorics, Hegemonics & Poststructural Dissonance

The experiences and knowledge of 'worldly things' relates to the pragmatics of reading. Together, students and teachers expand and develop their pragmatic knowledge as the curriculum unfolds. We have to know how to make the most of the many stories and diverse levels of understanding that enter our classrooms. I recall getting a frantic telephone call from Jo, a colleague in her first week of teaching. Her concern? That she would not have the answers to her Year 3 students' questions. Teachers will never have all the answers. I realised early in my career that the combined knowledge of the students far outweighs all that I will ever know. Students know how to change motor oil, plough fields, shop for the best bargains in the supermarket – things I may never know. The richness of the combined stories of all learners is the most powerful teaching/learning resource available in classrooms. It is this knowledge that readers draw on, and it is a good reason to provide students with opportunities to share their interests and capabilities. Communities of learners know the importance of sharing what they know.

Supporting readers by discussing the text, the topic and the cover (including electronic 'covers' like home pages) are just some ways in which teachers bridge the gap between the text presented and the knowledge and experience of the interpreter. Essentially, beginning readers need to understand what they are being asked to read *before* they read it. They need to be ensured of success. The following questions help bridge the gap between the stories of readers and their ability to gain access to meaning from the text.

Self-experience

- What do you think this is about?
- Have you ever been to a ...?
- Do you know anyone who has a ...?
- Tell me about your experiences of ...

Knowledge of the world

- Let's look through the text: what do you see happening in these illustrations?
- Read the first page. What do you think might happen? Why?
- Where could I go to find out more about this text before I start to read it?

Knowledge of texts

- Does this remind you of anything else that you have read or looked at?
- What do you know about this author?
- Let's find out who the characters are. How will we do that?
- Where does this story take place? How do you know that?

Start with dialogue

Dialogue is the key to understanding what readers bring to the reading situation. Teachers gain insights into students' thought processes, and the associations they make, by listening attentively to their conversations and explanations. Children strive to make sense of their worlds and they sometimes make profound, if not sound, connections.

Establish what learners know

When readers lack knowledge or experience of a topic or genre, they are disadvantaged. Their ability to comprehend content is limited by their inability to manage the *context* – that is, the bigger picture of what is being read. It's for this reason that jokes often fail. In order to appreciate jokes, the reader must understand subtexts, nuances of language and multiple layers of meaning. The following texts are extended 'jokes' that make the point.

How To Write Good

1. *Avoid alliteration. Always.*
2. *Prepositions are not words to end sentences with.*
3. *Avoid clichés like the plague. (They're old hat.)*
4. *Employ the vernacular.*
5. *Eschew ampersands & abbreviations, etc.*
6. *Parenthetical remarks (however relevant) are unnecessary.*
7. *It is wrong to ever split an infinitive.*
8. *Contractions aren't necessary.*
9. *Foreign words and phrases are not apropos.*
10. *One should never generalise.*
11. *Eliminate quotations. As Ralph Waldo Emerson said: "I hate quotations. Tell me what you know."*
12. *Comparisons are as bad as clichés.*
13. *Don't be redundant; don't use more words than necessary; it's highly superfluous.*
14. *Be more or less specific.*
15. *Understatement is always best.*
16. *One-word sentences? Eliminate.*
17. *Analogies in writing are like feathers on a snake.*
18. *The passive voice is to be avoided.*
19. *Go around the barn at high noon to avoid colloquialisms.*

20. *Even if a mixed metaphor sings, it should be derailed.*
21. *Who needs rhetorical questions?*
22. *Exaggeration is a billion times worse than understatement.*

Source: OzInterBiz <www.ozbiz.com.au/jokesentedu.htm>

Take a bough
An ode to the spelling chequer

Prays the Lord for the spelling chequer
That came with our pea sea!
Mecca mistake and it puts you rite
Its so easy to ewes, you sea.

I never used to no, was it e before eye?
(Four sometimes its eye before e.)
But now I've discovered the quay to success
It's as simple as won, too, free!

Janet E Byford. From *Take a Bough* (four verses).

To appreciate the humour of the list, the reader must know and understand the concept played upon in each line. As for the poem, the reader must understand homonyms and be experienced with computer spell-checkers to find this amusing. The meaning is compromised without this background information.

When pragmatic knowledge is lacking, readers mine for meaning using limited resources. Exposing students to a variety of experiences, going places together, opening up the world of literature and acknowledging each student's unique contribution to the overall learning of the class are important steps in the right direction. When we present texts to students, it is too easy to assume that they share similar experiences and knowledge. I was abruptly reminded that this was not the case when completing a unit of work on marine life with Year 1. I learned that, despite living within 20 minutes' of a major surfing beach, some of the students had never been to the beach.

Build on play

Children work in the world of stories when they play. Through play, they constantly build their pragmatic knowledge in a natural and unrestricted way. Weir (1962) documented the monologues of her son as he talked himself to sleep between the ages of 28 and 32 months. Her findings suggest that even at this young age, children not only exercise their knowledge of language, but in the process of using language create a scheme to organise things and actions. There exists a core to the organisation that provides cohesion.

Engel (1999) and Applebee (1978) report similar findings. Babies and pre-school children, they observe, often construct monologues when they are playing together, playing alone or preparing to go to sleep. These monologues have the organising and integrative function of narrative schemes. As they mature, their play activities continue to have an implicit narrative, or they act out the narrative as they tell it. Engel (1999) goes on to say that the development of narrative skills allows children to master two levels of understanding: 'cold' and 'hot'. 'Cold' is used to refer to cognitive skills and the organisation and relationship of things and actions in the physical world. 'Hot' refers to the comprehension of feelings and emotions.

According to Nicolopoulou (1996), narrative activities prepare the way for abstract thought development and deeper meaning processes. Learners relate more to what they are learning when they see themselves reflected in their efforts and have opportunities to share the outcomes of their learning with others (Harel & Papert, 1993). Reading is no different. Readers need to relate to what they are reading. Through collaboration, talk and cross-curricular connections, the value of multiple stories to learning is made apparent.

Self-experience

I was greeted by this note, magnetised to the fridge door:

Mum
Gone Blax
Be back 6.
Nathan

Knowing what I know about the author of the text (that he surfs), the geography of the area (Blacks Beach is a surfing hotspot) and the conventions of note-leaving (succinct, unedited, left in a highly visible location), I could make sense of this note. I drew on a range of information that took me beyond the tattered piece of paper. I drew on my self-experience and this allowed me to bring meaning to the text that may not be obvious to others.

Examine the following text. What do you already know? What is the pragmatic knowledge you bring to this text?

Camp was bad fun.

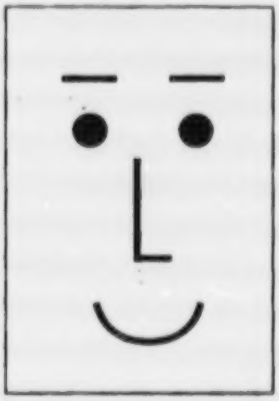
You may infer that the author is quite young because of the theme (camp) and sentence construction. Consequently, you read it a certain way and predict what is appropriate based on what you know about young children and their experiences. You would have a very different understanding of the author's intent if, instead of a child, I told you it was a 38-year-old refugee. Your reading of this text would be different.

What pragmatic knowledge do you bring to the reading of this text?

_ L • • _ ◡

You might make guesses based around ideas like geometry, computer coding etc.

Now look at a reorganised structure.



The discrete elements are organised into an instantly meaningful whole. The story created depends on who is doing the creating and the purpose of the experience. We view the world through a lens that filters the shape and impact of the texts we encounter. When reading, learners need to make sense of the pieces – they need to know how the components of texts relate to each other.

Some activities to help students bring self-experience to reading

Activity 1

Cumulative definitions

Prepare a definition comprising an unfamiliar headword or concept followed by six to ten short lines of information that represent a set of clues. Reveal only the title – the headword. Ask students, in pairs or groups, to discuss and write down what they think the word or concept means. Then reveal the first line of information. Ask students to amend their definition in the light of this new input. Continue this process until each line is revealed. Discuss how students' definitions

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changed throughout the process. Ask students to share their final definitions and the text clues they used. This activity could be adapted to provide visual/digital clues.

The following text has been used successfully for the purposes of this activity. When they see the headword 'Petoskeys', readers often assume that it is a surname. Their predictions change as more information is presented and more shared knowledge is constructed.

Petoskeys°

The boy was looking for petoskeys.

He was walking slowly to make sure that he wouldn't miss them.

Each time he looked, he found a number of them.

Petoskeys are not easy to find because they are almost the same colour as sand.

The boy enjoyed looking for the petoskeys on the beach; his mother used them in her work.

She was an artist and made jewellery with them.

When petoskeys are polished, they turn deep shades of brown-grey.

A pattern of six-sided figures shows up on them.

Source: Goodman, Y M & Burke, C (1980) *Reading Strategies: Focus on Comprehension*. Richard C Owens, New York.

° Petoskey: a grey–coloured stone left behind by ancient glaciers, containing intricate fossilised patterns.

Activity 2

T graphs

Students fold a piece of paper in half. On one side, they list all that they know about the topic of a set reading. They proceed to read the prescribed text. As they read, they add new information to the other side of the page. Discuss the new understandings.

Activity 3

Think aloud

In pairs, students read multiple copies of the same text. At predetermined times, they stop reading and share what they have understood and are thinking about up to that point. Reading resumes and the process of stopping and sharing continues.

World experience

As we read, we create images that invite us in, take us to new places and allow us to connect to other worlds. We build on what we know. Our life experiences give meaning to the text. In the following poem, Edwards personifies categories of words. As he does, he is asking readers to relate to many different experiences of the world. Clearly, the human attributes he describes have to be broadly recognisable if the poem is to connect with a general audience.

The Word Party

Loving words clutch crimson roses,
Rude words sniff and pick their noses,
Sly words come dressed up as foxes,
Short words stand on cardboard boxes,

Common words tell jokes and gabble,
Complicated words play scrabble,
Swear words stamp around and shout,
Hard words stare each other out,
Foreign words look lost and shrug,
Careless words trip on the rug,
Long words slouch with stooping shoulders,
Code words carry secret folders,
Silly words flick rubber bands,
Hyphenated words hold hands,
Strong words show-off, bending metal,
Sweet words call each other "petal",
Small words yawn and suck their thumbs
Till at last the morning comes,
Kind words give out farewell posies ...
Snap! The dictionary closes.

Source: Edwards, R (1987) *The Word Party.*
Lutterworth Press, Cambridge, UK.

The *Word Party* draws the reader into the images created and connections made to everyday things. However, in order to read the following text, a quite distinct knowledge and experience is required.

You – ringin' bells with bags from Chanel
Baby Benz, traded in your Hyundai Excel
Fully equipped, CD changer with the cell
She beeped me, meet me at twelve

You managed to read this, but did you comprehend it? Does it inspire you to want to read another similar text? What world knowledge does it require in order for it to make sense? Now read another representation of this text.

Despite the fact that you attempted to win her at her doorstep with bags full of expensive clothes and a car (the lower-end model Mercedes Benz which you financed by signing over your current vehicle) containing an expensive

> *stereo and a cellular phone, your woman has contacted me through my pager indicating that we should rendezvous at midnight.*
>
> Source: Translation of Ebonics to Standard English by a high-school student.

The language we use has power, and serves to include or exclude. When the interpreter's world experience is at odds with the text, reading is guesswork – the reader doesn't 'get it'.

Not only does the vocabulary in the above text intrude on how we comprehend, but the syntax also complicates the reading. Dyson (1993a, 1993b) suggests that students have to become *social negotiators* when introduced to texts that are in conflict with constructions of themselves and others. They have to look for ways to merge the knowledge they have of their peers, school, home and other public spheres while creating meaning about themselves and others. They are frequently positioned or socialised to adopt the stance associated with their memberships or status in communities. As Hall and colleagues (1978:90) argue, making meaning is often dependent upon the *cultural maps* available to us.

> *An event only 'makes sense' if it can be located within a range of known social and cultural identifications ... This bringing of events within the realm of meanings means, in essence, referring unusual and unexpected events to the 'maps of meaning' which already form the basis of our cultural knowledge, into which the social world is already mapped.*

Rogers and Soter (eds, 1997:31) contend that "Our statements and cultural referents specify not only with what and whom we identify, but also with what and whom we *do not* identify". It is paramount that we recognise that as readers strive to read and respond to texts, they borrow from and construct their understandings from a position of difference. In order to support students to tell their stories and 'talk back' to literature, we need to be aware of what constrains and what opens up possibilities when they engage with texts.

In classrooms where the teacher selects all reading material, all students are disadvantaged, but some more than others. They are excluded, in the same way that the rap excludes. *It is essential that readers have choice in what they read*, and they must be involved in the decision-making process. The devaluing of student choice was apparent when the new and keen Year 7 cohort of students at my local high school was presented with the following questionnaire by the English teacher on day 1.

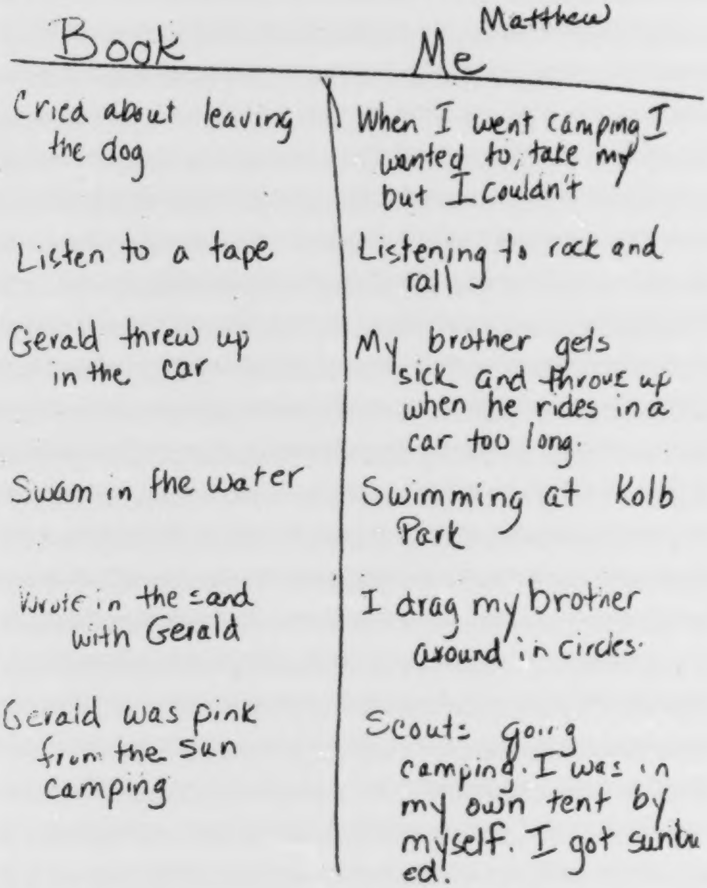
- What was the last novel you read?
- What did you think of it?
- If you have not read a novel recently, explain why not.

This teacher had prioritised a certain type of reading. These young boys and girls were readers, but their reading varied from surfing magazines to newspapers to the Internet. Rather than celebrating the diversity of their reading and using that as a springboard into different genres, the message was loud and clear: only a certain type of reading was valued in this classroom. The world experience and interests of already tentative readers was sadly overlooked.

An activity to bring world experience to reading

Book and Me

Developed by Bintz and Dillard (2000), this activity provides an opportunity for students to link texts with their world experience. Students draw a T down the page, labelling one column 'Book' and the other 'Me'. During or after reading, students write on the left (Book) side a sentence, phrase or word that catches their attention or leaps out at them. On the right (Me) side, they write down what the connection is to their lives. Perhaps it is a personal connection, a question that arises, or an aesthetic/emotional response. On completion, students share their lists in small groups.



Matthew

Book	Me
Cried about leaving the dog	When I went camping I wanted to, take my but I couldn't
Listen to a tape	Listening to rock and rall
Gerald threw up in the car	My brother gets sick and throve up when he rides in a car too long.
Swam in the water	Swimming at Kolb Park
Wrote in the sand with Gerald	I drag my brother around in circles.
Gerald was pink from the sun camping	Scouts going camping. I was in my own tent by myself. I got suntued!

Matthew's response to a reading of Bob Graham's
Greetings from Sandy Beach.

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Knowledge of texts

Readers need to make connections from one text to another. When readers have a meaningful experience with a text, it scaffolds them into other texts. A sign that literacy programs are working is when teacher read-alouds are interrupted with students' voices claiming: "This books starts like ...; Those illustrations are the same as ...; It sounds like a book I read the other day ...; It is about the same topic as ...". Reading is a generative process, and should lead readers from one text to another.

The changing nature of text connections

Language is constantly evolving, and the short messaging service (SMS) has linked technology and literacy in a creative way. The impact of this new medium on how we spell and construct meaning could shape the language of the future. What pragmatic knowledge about texts do you depend on when reading the following messages? Can you access the code?

SMS messages

1. BTW
2. AAM
3. AFAIC
4. F2T
5. THNQ
6. :--------------)
7. GR8M8
8. CYA

If you use a mobile phone you may be a member of this community or 'literacy club'. If you are a competent reader but do not access the world of SMS, then you are forced simultaneously to work out the code while searching for meaning. With SMS it is important to understand the context; the message is confined to a very small screen and the language used draws on knowledge of phonics and the interpretation of symbols. In order to read this, you have to be able to make text-to-text connections. Message 6, in fact, asks the reader to connect with the story of Pinocchio and the notion of a very long nose representing someone who does not tell the truth.

SMS meanings

1. by the way
2. as a matter [of fact]
3. as far as I am concerned
4. free to talk
5. thank you
6. you are a big liar
7. great mate
8. see ya

Different texts demand different types of reading

When it comes to making text-to-text connections, readers need to be aware that different texts demand different types of reading. How you approach a factual text is very different from how you approach a novel, map or dictionary. I recall Damian's confusion in Year 2 when he attempted to read a factual text about wars. He believed it was necessary to start at the beginning and read to the end. Sitting on the floor and demonstrating how readers flick through the pages and read selected excerpts freed him up to enjoy these books rather than think he was failing.

Books such as *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* (Scieszka, 1992) and *The Lost Thing* (Tan, 2000) are reminders that writing is a creative act. In these books, organisational patterns – such as the location and presentation of title, credits and text – do not conform to expectations. In many ways, they turn the reader into a hunter or clue-gatherer. However, these books are remembered, and students seek them out. Bear in mind that it is often in the breach of conventions that young readers are made of aware of the conventions themselves.

Readers and writers need to manipulate genres to suit their needs. They need to unpack genres rather than learn prescriptive ways of representing them. When asked questions such as "What makes a fable a fable?" learners are invited to explore and understand the characteristics of fables. It is in this investigative process of unpacking the genre, supported by timely teacher identification and naming of language features, that they come to understand how the genre works, how to manipulate the form to suit their purposes and how to create new texts.

Activities to build knowledge of texts

Activity 1

What makes a fable a fable?

- Select a range of fables. These sites have in excess of 1000 fables from which to select:
  www.AesopFables.com
  www.fables.org

http://www.umass.edu.aesop

- In groups of three, students read a collection of fables to each other. Each group identifies and lists the characteristics of fables according to what they have read.
- Compile a class list of characteristics.
- Share information about Aesop, a Samian slave who reportedly lived in Greece between 620 and 560 BCE. This additional information adds to their understanding and introduces the specific language of fables. Point out language features such as past tense, time and cause connectives such as "and so it was that".

Activity 2

What makes a poem a poem?

Use the following poem by Colin McNaughton to demonstrate the worst possible poem.

THE WERST POME WOT I EVER RITTED

Roses are red,
Vilets are bloo.
Do yoo luv me?
Cos I luv her.

Source: McNaughton, C (2000) *There's an Awful Lot of Weirdos in Our Neighbourhood.* Walker Books, London.

- Individually, students write their worst possible poem.
- Students elect to display their bad poetry.
- The characteristics of bad poetry are identified. Ask: What makes a bad poem bad?

In order to know what makes a bad poem bad, students must also know what makes a good poem good. This is one way of tapping into students' understandings and misconceptions about poetry. Issues such as "poems should rhyme" are discussed, and new understandings about the nature of poetry are revealed.

The website <http://www.westegg.com/nash/> presents Ogden Nash's poetry online. It is highly recommended.

Activity 3

Suspended sentence

Start a run-on sentence online, and watch as the sentence grows from responses from all over the world.

Activity 4

Paired books

In pairs, students read two books that they have selected independently. Each reads her/his selected book to the other. They then identify ways in which the books are similar and different. A Venn diagram could be developed to show the connections.

Activity 5

Combined timeline

In pairs, students read two books that they have selected independently. Each reads his/her selected book to the other. They then attempt to plot the events of the stories on a shared timeline. The idea is to find a similar way of mapping the sequence of events.

Activity 6

Word play

The following websites and ideas provide interesting and varied ways of playing with words, expanding vocabulary, broadening understandings of the nuances of the language, and boosting confidence to manipulate language in a way that supports the intended message. The more learners feel confident to play with language and apply what they know about how language works, the greater is their access to texts as readers.

Euphemisms

- Present some common euphemisms such as "vertically challenged" (short), "beautiful on the inside" (ugly).
- Using your examples as a starting point, discuss and define a 'euphemism' (e.g. a way of saying something but not saying it).
- In pairs or groups, ask students to develop euphemisms to describe: a country with bad weather; a person who is always late; a person who is always rude; a bad sporting blunder; a town that has no entertainment.

Eponyms

http://members.aol.com/wrdstyle/eponyms1.htm

Eponyms are words derived from someone's name. At this site students can discover notables such as impresario Alessandro Fiasco, whose opera stage collapsed and injured cast members in Italy in the nineteenth century.

- Use the site to research the name origins of some common words.
- Invite students to create a phrase or sentence in which they name an object or process after themselves (e.g. "This bedroom is a complete McCracken!"; "Why don't you Lucic your way over here?".
- Extension: use the activity above to lead into the idea of rhyming slang with the phrase "He's having a Barry" (Barry > Crocker > shocker). List and create other forms of rhyming slang.

Rhyming dictionary

http://www.rhymer.com

- Introduce or reinforce the idea of a rhyming couplet: two lines whose end-words rhyme.
- Ask students to create the first line of a rhyming couplet.
- Using the rhyming dictionary, ask them to identify three words that rhyme with their end-word.
- Have the students complete the second line of the couplet in three different ways (that is, using each rhyming word).

Semantic rhyming dictionary

www.rhymezone.com

This site can be used to explore other properties of words and relationships between words. For example, use the antonym-finding function to 'say it with sarcasm' (e.g. good = wicked).

Wacky word games

www3.telus.net/teachwell/wwwpage.htm

Create exploratory opportunities for students to find words within words, similes, anagrams etc. This kind of word play often supports spelling knowledge (e.g. there is 'a rat' in 'separate').

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4

Storying and inquiry

Whose stories are told?

Every teacher carries a notion of curriculum. It's possible to represent curriculum through many metaphors: a set of overlapping cells that contain knowledge domains; the opening out of essential learnings; a set of targets or learning outcomes; blocks that build on one another; a walk into a sea that goes ever deeper; and so on. Here, we will consider it as a set of connected stories grounded in different realities, and told from different perspectives – the perspectives of maths, science, humanities etc.

You may argue that some stories have more legitimacy than others. That cannot be denied. There are reasons why certain representations of knowledge hold sway, and that is why all inquiry needs to embed the ideas of testing, checking, confirming and authenticating. In research terms, this is referred to as *triangulation* – the researcher seeks out multiple versions of the same story or phenomenon to identify and understand the commonalities that connect the discrete sources. The approach is somewhat similar to that of an investigative journalist seeking to substantiate accounts.

Today's students have far greater access to content and multiple stories than ever before. Enter any topic into a search engine and you will note the many ways of pursuing it. It is possible to design curriculum along similar lines – something that spirals out to embrace the diverse world of learners.

There is a point of tension here. An unrefined web search of the topic 'transport', for instance, yields nearly 15 million results! This book advocates *purposeful* teaching, not the "Russian roulette kind of offering of content" that Garth Boomer (1991) portrayed as a compelling reason to move towards standards-referenced, outcomes-based education. But it was Boomer who also recognised that teachers should "deliberately plan to invite students to contribute to, and to modify, the educational program, so that they will have a real investment both in the learning journey and the outcomes". This speaks eloquently for what curriculum should *not* be: a spiral inwards to bring all learners to one predetermined point.

As we grow as learners, we constantly shape our realities to reflect the acquisition of new understandings. We scrutinise our evolving truth of the world when we transfer and test out what we know across a range of contexts. Some truths we discard, some we question, others we adopt. We look for patterns in learning that connect and resonate with our experiences.

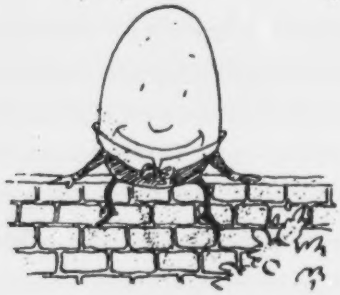
As teachers, it is certainly possible to relay universally held concepts by direct instruction – the 'truth', for example, that one and one make two. However, learners come to *know* that one and one make two because, every time the idea is tested, it is verified in their experience, and the experiences of others. Even so, there are many other things that learners 'know' – things that are repeatedly verified – that are *versions*, or stories.

Take a minute to reflect on this well known nursery rhyme.

Humpty Dumpty

Humpty Dumpty sat on the wall,
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall,
All the king's horses and all the king's men
Couldn't put Humpty together again.

If you had to illustrate this rhyme, what would you draw? Having asked this same question of thousands of students, I can guarantee that you would draw an egg sitting on a wall. The more creative student might also include a pile of eggshells on the ground. You may have visualised something similar to this.



Take another look at the rhyme. There is no mention of an egg, or anything resembling an egg.

My classroom walls have regularly featured artistic representations of an egg figure sitting atop a neat array of bricks. As a class, we have discussed the egg and its shattering. My classes have dutifully crumpled paper, coloured in and emblazoned Humpty in all his glory. However, if we trace the origins of this nursery rhyme, we will discover that it is a poem about a cannon ball.

According to the East Anglia Tourist Board in England, Humpty Dumpty was a powerful cannon deployed during the English civil war (1642-49). It was mounted on top of the Wall Church in Gloschester. During battle, the enemy hit the church tower, blowing off the top and sending the cannon tumbling to the ground. The king's men tried to mend Humpty in vain. A better illustration of the rhyme might look like this.

In our classrooms, as in our wider discourses, there is a tendency to prioritise a set of stories and to marginalise or ignore alternative representations. The stories that are told are often narrowly defined, and usually represent a dominant and unchallenged value system.°

Teachers are honourable tellers of our culture's tales. In many ways, the time once reserved for sharing stories around the kitchen table has become the province of the classroom teacher and the students at her or his feet. Teacher-told stories are frequently predetermined and reinforced through the adoption of teacher-selected texts. The question for teachers is this: do these stories and texts support a set of problems or inquiry questions to be pursued, or has the inquiry already

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° The PETA book *Write Me In: Inclusive Texts in the Primary Classroom* (Rowan, 2001) looks at ways of uncovering mythical norms in texts and then rerepresenting experience through 'counternarratives'.

been done? The rest of this chapter will look at ways to ensure that there is room in curriculum delivery for multiple perspectives and pathways to learning.

Towards an inquiry-driven curriculum

It is significant that new approaches to curriculum in Australia, such as the New Basics being trialled in Queensland, are inquiry-driven. That is, 'new basics', or 'new essential learnings', however they might be characterised, are created in response to big questions. In Queensland, these big questions situate the learner at the centre of an inquiry process (Education Queensland, 2001):

- Who am I and where am I going?
- How do I make sense of and communicate with the world?
- What are my rights and responsibilities in communities, cultures and economies?
- How do I describe, analyse and shape the world around me?

The world of research and inquiry is no longer dominated by empirical analysis in which answers are bound by predictable stimuli and measurable responses. The research world has undergone a paradigm shift. Qualitative research highlights the need to discover and understand multiple ways of knowing – multiple stories. This shift in paradigms can be used to inform curriculum decisions such what gets taught and how it is taught.

In order to accommodate new ways of seeking knowledge and understanding, the principles of research could be applied to students' learning and their pursuit of literacy. Qualitative methods give rise to questions such as:

- How can the learner be a valued informant in his/her own learning process?
- Does the learner understand the purpose of the inquiry?
- How can classrooms accommodate 30 curricula instead of one?
- Where do learners go to seek answers to their inquiry questions?
- Who are the stakeholders in the learning process?
- How is information shared amongst stakeholders – learners in the classroom?
- Who is held accountable for the learning that occurs?

Storying has the potential to shape curriculum decisions to include multiple ways of knowing and the voices of all stakeholders – students, teachers, parents, other community members. When curriculum is approached as *meaning-making*, it has the power to unlock stories that have the potential to meet the needs of diverse learners who are each whole people. The social, intellectual and personal aspects of the learner are united.

For the qualitative researcher, Humpty Dumpty would be investigated from many angles. In the first instance, the researcher would have a clear idea of the *purpose* of pursuing the topic, including a reason for why the research might be valuable or significant to her/his life and the lives of others. For example, the foremost purpose of investigation might be to investigate what happened, or why it happened, or who was responsible, or what was affected, or what arose. To do any of these things, the researcher would search out different versions of events, compare them to see where there is agreement and contradiction, pose questions to test the credibility of narrative variations, then begin to "put Humpty together again". The researcher would not blindly accept accounts but would look for alternative ways of understanding. As a necessary extension of this, the perspective of different stakeholder groups would be sought – for example, townspeople, soldiers, strangers to the town, fortress-builders, cannon-ball manufacturers, and those who witnessed the event. In addition, the researcher would spend time observing at the scene, uncovering articles and documents pertaining to castle walls, collect artefacts from the surrounding area, participate in local conversations and seek out other sources of information (historical records, literature, local council information). How the incident is reported in the local press could also shed new light on the phenomenon under investigation. The resulting picture would be rich and illuminating.

As an involved participant, the researcher is motivated and excited about sharing what is learned. His/Her knowledge is constructed with other informants in order to gain new insights and understandings. The term 'thick description' is used in the world of research to describe the many layers of understanding generated by topic investigation. Applying these principles to the classroom means giving learners opportunities to pursue different dimensions of the same topic and pool their understandings. This is sometimes realised in small-group classrooms by the 'jigsaw' approach in which different learning groups develop specific expertise that is later pooled to construct greater knowledge. Together, expert groups can also seek to identify *patterns* that explain the phenomenon.

An inquiry framework

Short and Harste, with Burke (1998) present the authoring cycle as a curricular framework for inquiry. The following diagram (Fig. 4.1) represents the framework. Note that the arrows go both ways, indicating the continual movement back and forth between the various aspects of the inquiry process.

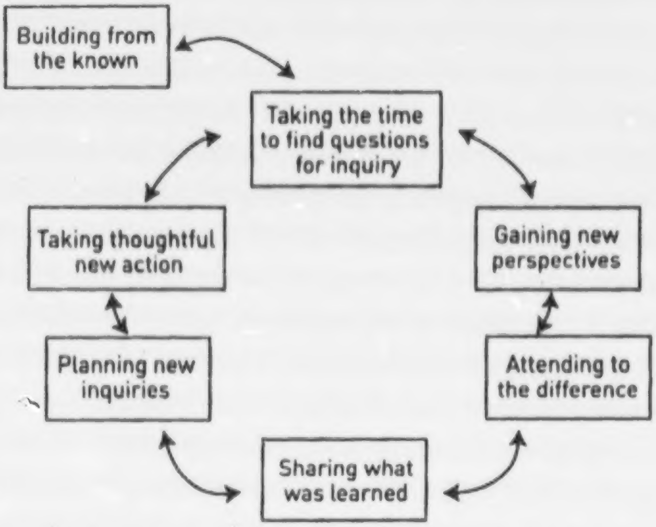
Building from the known
Taking the time to find questions for inquiry
Taking thoughtful new action
Gaining new perspectives
Planning new inquiries
Attending to the difference
Sharing what was learned

Figure 4.1: The authoring cycle as a curricular framework for inquiry

This framework starts with the known and has learners identify questions that they deem to be important and relevant starting points of inquiry. Seeking new perspectives through interactions with others and engaging with texts are two ways of gaining new understandings on the topic of investigation. Sharing, reflecting and making informed decisions are part and parcel of the inquiry process. At any point of the cycle, learners can move backwards or forwards to rediscover new insights or verify and act on what they have discovered.

curriculum as a set of connected stories

As we have seen, when curriculum places a focus on *meaning-making*, learning revolves around important questions that learners, supported by teachers, wish to satisfy. A unit on war could be negotiated around the questions people in the community might ask. The following overview (Fig. 4.2) resulted from a brainstorming session with Year 6.

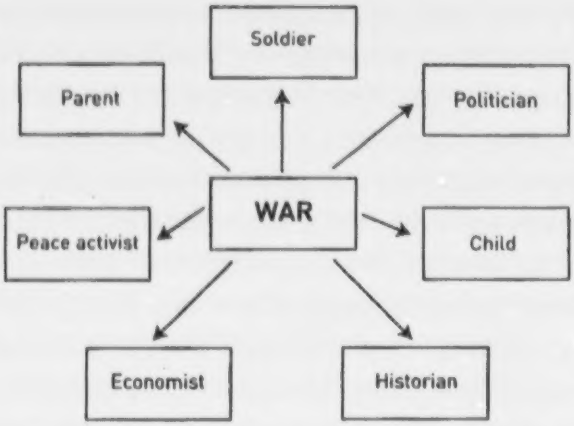

Figure 4.2: Year 6 brainstorm around who in the community might have an important perspective on war.

In small groups, the students brainstormed a list of questions that might be posed by each community member identified. The questions identified for 'soldier' included:

- Who is the enemy?
- Where have wars been situated?
- What artillery is available?
- Why would I be a soldier and not a sailor?
- What is a civil war?
- Do I get paid when I go to war?
- Who gets conscripted? Why?
- What are conditions like on a battlefield?
- How many soldiers have been killed in wars?
- How do soldiers communicate with each other and their families during wartime?

Student groups then used questions like these to investigate war from each perspective identified. The stories that unfolded from these questions, and which students were encouraged to synthesise and retell, reflected multiple approaches towards the topic of inquiry. Students' new understandings were presented, discussed and represented in a number of different 'tellings' – a poster, an oral report, an interview etc.

The teacher is not absent from this process. Teacher support may be critical at the very earliest stages (for example, there are no 'where' and few 'why' questions in the set of questions above, and a set of question-starters might empower groups to think more broadly). Right through the investigation process, students are likely to reach 'sticking points': they may need some direction in terms of appropriate resources; they may confront specialised language and terms that require explanation; or they may need to be reminded of the focus of their work – the questions that they wanted to answer.

Clearly, the approach to curriculum advocated here will only work if the learner has access to many and varied resources. Text sets – books, posters, poetry, factual texts, tapes, videos, artefacts, music, fiction, reports and letters – must be available to students. Equally, students must have access to websites that offer rich information about unit themes or inquiry topics. In all, what is being described here is challenge-rich and support-rich teaching and learning – an approach advocated by Mariani (1997) as being most likely to extend students' learning and capabilities.°

In real life, students learn from one another whether it be riding a bike or playing the latest digital game. They learn in social contexts as they complete authentic tasks. Knowing that their ideas are valued and respected, they share freely with one another, make connections and learn new things. We are reminded of this in the statement by William Glasser (1981) regarding how we learn best.

- We learn 10% of what we read.
- We learn 20% of what we hear.
- We learn 30% of what we see.

° The PETA book *Scaffolding: Teaching and Learning in Language and Literacy Education* (Hammond, ed., 2001) provides a fuller description of the role of the teacher in creating conditions that support optimal student learning.

- We learn 50% of what we see and hear.
- We learn 70% of what is discussed.
- We learn 80% of what we experience.
- We learn 95% of what we teach to someone else.

If lessons and units of work are seen as good stories to be told, rather than simply sets of objectives to be met, pedagogy will change. Lessons will be more organic in nature, and meaning will be cast in centre stage. Links to learners' interests and needs will be given priority.

The discipline, curriculum area or domains from which we elect to tell the story will dramatically influence the story told. The discipline not only demands a unique expression of the story but requires the learning and adoption of the distinctive language that reflects the established discourses of the discipline in which learning is sited.

Activities for the teacher

Redefining curriculum from many perspectives

Identify a unit of work you intend to complete in the future. Represent it as a central box and locate the curriculum areas around it. Ask what questions each curriculum area could pose in relation to this topic.

Create text sets

Scour the library and resource centre to find a diverse range of texts that support the topic of investigation. Remember to include poems, songs, memorabilia, factual texts and picture books. Use Internet sites to extend the range of resources available.

Negotiate the curriculum

Have students divide a piece of paper into three. Ask them to:

- list everything they know about a selected topic (column 1)

- identify questions that they have about the topic (column 2)
- identify where they could seek answers to the questions asked (column 3).

Share and discuss the lists. Collate the information and compile a class list as a basis for exploring the topic.

Identify a starting point

Put the topic to be investigated on the board. Ask students to identify the people in the community who might be interested in learning about this topic. Discuss what their interest could be and the questions that they might ask. List these questions as possible inquiry questions to be pursued by students.

Think-ink-pair-share

Read three different texts associated with a topic of inquiry – for example, a picture book, poem and factual account. Ask students to write a personal response and to then share the response with a partner. Students reflect on their partner's writing and add their own written comments. Discuss the topic as a class.

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5

A storying community: Classroom collaboration

Stories know no bounds. When stories are exchanged, tellers and interpreters share their differing understandings of events and experiences. This sharing can result in rich and deep alignments. Stories provide a road to empathy, understanding and acceptance because when we share stories we become characters in our own stories as well as those of others. Simultaneously, we come to deeper knowledge of content, of others and of ourselves.

It's become something of an educational cliché to speak of schools and classrooms as 'learning communities'. This chapter will look at ways in which a storying approach to teaching and learning can move the idea of a learning community from rhetoric into practice.

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Stories are the glue that hold together diverse members of a community. Sharing stories gives the group a common language and experience on which to build trust and relationships. Berger (1984) says that we use stories to shape our social realities, and that people's characteristic stories change as they progress from one life theme to another. The story we create about who we are reflects the orientation, values, events, discourses and relationships of the communities with which we interact.

McKnight (1992) lists stories as one of the five indicators of community. He states that *reflection* upon individual and community experiences provides knowledge about truth, relationships and future directions. We will explore the value of reflection in some detail later in this chapter.

In the collaborative classroom, students are *storying* in the fullest sense (see 'Some terms used in this book', p iv). They are:

- representing individual understandings through story
- constructing a shared story as they engage in pair or small-group interactions
- continuously reinforcing and revising a metanarrative about what it is to be a member of this classroom community.

Relationships in the Classroom

Classrooms are the perfect venue for accommodating and connecting many stories. Education is relational, and the stories we have about how we relate to others, about our experiences as learners, about learning, about teaching and about life play a significant role in how we interact with students. We are all stories in the making, and our stories need to be heard and respected. For some children, the classroom is the only place for their voices to be acknowledged and appreciated. Sharing in one another's stories is fundamental to creating relationships that empower individuals and nurture a feeling of connectedness. Without a deliberate effort to reflect a view of curriculum that prioritises relationships, collaboration and decision-making, we as teachers will remain the 'keepers of curriculum', and there can be no community ownership of learning.

In order to fully appreciate the role of relationships in learning, we have to examine our own personal meta-narratives – the things we say about ourselves, consciously and unconsciously, in our roles as teachers, collaborators and learners. Likewise, we need to look at how we value and respect the internal talk and the shared talk of the students with whom we work (see also Chapter 2).

Classrooms are unique environments that have a significant impact on the stories that are told. As Cazden (1988:99) points out, "The goal of education is intra individual change and student learning. We have to consider how the words spoken in classrooms affect the outcomes of education: how observable classroom discourse affects the unobservable thought processes of each of the participants, and thereby the nature of what students learn".

Difference

Cazden's point about out the significance of "the words spoken in classrooms" poses an important question for teachers: how is difference reflected in the language that is modelled and preferred as a tacit means of gaining acceptance in the classroom community? Are different ways of narrating – of saying what is known – valued as natural and normal?

Language is the learner's passport to his or her culture. Amaro and Moreira (2001) claim that each community has its own particular way of making use of narrative skills and of telling stories. When stories are told, the closer they conform to the expectations of the culture the easier it is to gain access to the culture. Stories and culture cannot be separated because stories:

- carry cultural heritage and inform about cultural membership
- expose the images, rhythm, meter, formulae, metaphor and story techniques of cultures
- give voice to silenced communities
- prepare the learner for a literate-and-oral culture.

On the other hand, stories can create dissonance, particularly when listeners are not attuned to the cultural orientation of the teller. That dissonance should serve as a warning. If our expectations are disrupted when the teller's orientation is 'different' (that is to say, not consonant with the conventions of the dominant culture), it suggests that our own tellings (if we are part of that dominant culture) may be having a reciprocal effect on many learners. And so we must ask ourselves questions that can apply equally to the culture at large as to the classroom: Which voices have authority? Which are silent?

Students' distinctive voices need to be heard, their stories valued. The cultures from which stories emerge need to be a natural part of classroom instruction. Mayanna's writing is a tribute to the exploration of a young child trying to accommodate the diverse cultures in which she finds herself.

I nanai Kua Paraku tita
apa au. And I Went
With my Papa to the
Shop

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Mayanna starts in Cook Island Maori and moves to English. She has drawn on her wide-ranging knowledge of two language systems, and the fact that she can operate and transfer between two languages is an advantage. The cognitive and intellectual benefits of bilingualism have been well documented (Jones Diaz, 2001). Language and identity are inextricably linked, and bilingual learners should be given every opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and authority as code-switchers. Almost every society today is multilingual. As Edwards (1988) points out, the only parameters that differ are the extent and tolerance of diversity. Learners like Mayanna require support in learning the 'literacies of power'. At the same time, they should not be marginalised because of an inability to acknowledge and appreciate differences.

Dyson and Genishi (1994:4) make the significant point that "Stories, and aspects of children's selves, can be silenced if listeners (including teachers and peers) do not appreciate the diverse ways stories are crafted and the range of experiences they tap". The sharing of cultural stories will only occur in classrooms where teacher and students respect diversity, are appreciative and sensitive towards others, are provided with ample time to be reflective, and enjoy experimenting with language. They need time to express their stories freely with one another. In such classrooms, the teacher looks for and encourages connection points across curriculum areas and learning experiences.

Difference and reconciliation

Liz Weir, a professional storyteller in Northern Ireland, reflects on the role of story as a means of appreciating difference and restoring community.

> *I work in Northern Ireland so cross-community story-telling is something I believe in strongly, as we need to know about difference in order to accept it. We need to listen to each other's stories ...*

> *One of the most important anecdotes I have is something that happened to my colleague Billy Teare. Before the cease-fires, he was working in the west of Northern Ireland in County Tyrone on the border with the Irish Republic. This was an area that had seen a lot of conflict; sectarian murders and cross-community tensions were high. It is a very rural area and the elementary schoolchildren from the local Protestant and Catholic schools were bussed on the same bus. The Protestants sat on one side of the bus and the Catholics on the other (shades of the deep south). Apparently, they didn't speak or interact with each other at all. At the time, Billy had been working in the Catholic school for one week and was to start in the Protestant school the following week.*
>
> *Monday morning arrived. No sooner had the bus delivered the children to school when the driver rushed into the principal's office. He excitedly explained how, on the way to school, the children with whom Billy had worked the previous week told the other children on the bus about the stories they would hear when Billy came to their school. They even retold some of the stories. This may sound like a small thing, but it's a really powerful one in the life of a small community.*
>
> Used with permission.

Francis Firebrace (Yorta-Yorta), a professional Aboriginal storyteller, shares similar sentiments and says that storying is not just about building respect for each other, but respect for all things.

> *The power of story-telling lies in the messages and morals these stories contain. And if told in the right way, they open the minds and touch the hearts of those who listen, so that the seeds of good lessons are firmly planted. Story-telling is the oldest and most spiritual way of communicating with one another and has been a proven method by indigenous cultures since the beginning of time.*

> *Teachers when they use the stories attract the attention of their students through the animals, birds and other creatures. Children all over are fascinated by the creatures of the world and my people often used stories to build self-esteem in our young men and women, something that is badly lacking in this modern-day society. Stories can teach respect for one another, the creatures, and the earth itself.*
>
> Used with permission.

Stories can and do bridge divides. Even the *retelling* of a story can, as in Liz Weir's anecdote above, lead to new understandings that help learners to negotiate differences. It is this capacity of story to act as a medium of negotiation that makes it a powerful agent of community-building.

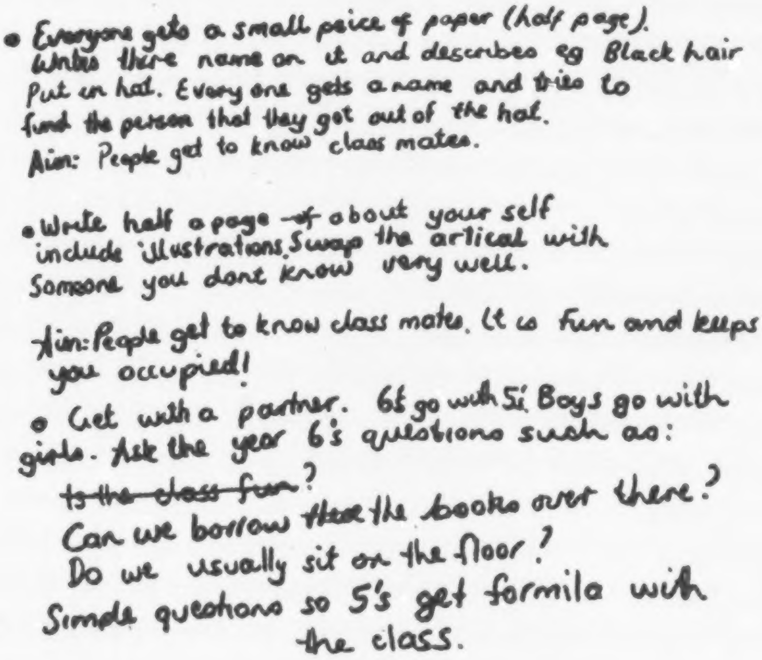
The storying mode does not make differences disappear, of course – and as teachers, that is not our aim in the classroom. Rather, it is a mode that acts simultaneously as a *knowing* and an *offering*, or invitation. As discussed in Chapter 1, to narrate is to know. But as we also recognised in that chapter, to narrate is to participate in a way of representing that all students know about from the moment they arrive at school.

Tannen (1982) talks about the balance between two competing, contradictory pulls when we interact with others. These she refers to as *involvement* and *considerateness*. We share stories with one another because we want to be affirmed, we want to be alike. Simultaneously, we want to be different. In our listening, we try to connect and distance ourselves at the same time; coming together while preserving our autonomy. Teacher and storyteller Phyllis McDuff explains that "Stories are not dry pieces of information. Stories are not simply a set of amusing circumstances. A real story is a potent human experience holding universal truths that can impact on our lives. Stories reveal patterns. They take us to a far objective viewpoint and at the same time take us close to the emotion of the human in the drama. We safely share the experience."

Power

Relationships in the classroom are negotiated. We expect students to trust us to make the right decisions on their behalves, but do we trust students to value who we are? Are we too fixed on guarding ourselves from the students we teach because if they came to know us, our control of the classroom could be under threat? Many issues relating to relationships reside in issues of power and control.

> *Linda taught a composite Year 5/6 class. She had spent considerable time building a collaborative classroom environment. When her father was hospitalised with a serious illness, Linda shared the news with her students at the end of the school year.*
>
> *The following year, when school was preparing to resume, Linda was surprised when two of her students stepped in to give her a hand.*
>
> *"My classroom had been repainted and recarpeted during the holidays. Two of my students had offered to come and help set up the classroom prior to the start of the school year. I arrived early on the prearranged date to be greeted by Maria and Emma. Not only did they come prepared to move boxes, books and gadgets, they arrived with a piece of cardboard behind their backs. When asked what they were hiding, they looked at each other, grinned and said: 'We know your dad's been in hospital and you probably haven't had much time to prepare for school, so we've prepared the activities for our first day'! They handed me an overview of how they thought the class should be organised on day 1 [see opposite]."*



- Everyone gets a small peice of paper (half page). Writes there name on it and describes eg Black hair Put in hat. Every one gets a name and tries to find the person that they got out of the hat.
  Aim: People get to know class mates.

- Write half a page ~~of~~ about your self include illustrations. Swap the artical with Someone you dont know very well.

  Aim: People get to know class mates. It is Fun and keeps you occupied!

- Get with a partner. 6s go with 5s. Boys go with girls. Ask the year 6's questions such as:
  ~~Is the class fun~~?
  Can we borrow ~~these~~ the books over there?
  Do we usually sit on the floor?
  Simple questions so 5's get formila with the class.

Our students appreciate knowing we are human. It is part of their need and desire to relate. Through sharing who we are, we give students opportunities to connect, and to show their capacity to care. Linda adopted the plan because she respected the judgement of the students in her class and agreed that it was a good plan for the first day of term.

Learning to get along

We are not born socialising. We continue to learn interpersonal skills from the womb to the tomb. In a collaborative classroom, social skills are taught explicitly and rehearsed in real learning situations. Social skills are learned because they are integral to the process and the context demands of an inquiring classroom community. This requires listening, negotiating, turn-taking and feeding back. As the level of interaction increases, social skills become more complex. Following are some important guidelines for 'getting along'.

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Support positive interdependence

Encourage team members to make a commitment to each other's success. It is this ingredient that drives the team to work together. In this way, individual output will be seen as a reflection of how well the group supports its members. Members are required to be flexible and take up diverse roles such as listener, critical friend, conference partner, supporter and problem-solver.

Enable interaction

We negotiate our way to learning. In collaborative activities, there is talking, discussing, challenging, questioning, creating and understanding. Time for sharing stories is seen as an integral part of the curriculum, not something tacked onto the end of the day. Interactions vary according to the task and how well students understand what is required of them.

Make time for focused reflection

We need to make links to the past in order to learn the present and make choices for the future. Reflection provides an opportunity for students to seek clarification and to self-evaluate. It is not 'down time', and there are many questions that can give focus to students' reflections. In collaborative classrooms, these questions will guide students to consider:

- their content understanding
- the learning process
- their personal contribution.

Useful teacher questions around each of these areas are provided elsewhere in this chapter ('Reflecting on the task').

The benefits of collaboration

- greater productivity and achievement
- constructive and creative thinking skills (planning, inferring)
- social competency (trust in others, awareness of interdependence, sense of direction and purpose, on-task behaviour)
- motivation (high expectations of success, persistence)
- social support (high-quality relationships, constructive management of stress)
- psychological health (the ability to develop, maintain and improve relationships)
- personal responsibility (including goal-setting)
- self-esteem (improved due to positive peer relations and team success)
- positive interpersonal relationships (acceptance of diversity)
- inter-group relationships (caring concern, acceptance of diversity, commitment to the common good)
- increased perspective-taking (being able to walk in another's shoes, listening to others' ideas).

The ingredients of effective collaboration

A group goal

- There is a joint product or a single outcome.

A group task

- All members contribute and take specific roles. There is an atmosphere of shared leadership. All members have responsibility for input.

Group accountability

- Groups must deal with, and resolve, their own problems. The emphasis is not only on the product but on the way in which the task is managed.
- Group members must jointly participate in the presentation of findings, products or outcomes.

Group acknowledgement

- Recognition is given first to the group, rather than any of its individuals.

Getting started

In order to plan for collaborative inquiry, some fundamental questions must be considered. These relate to:

- **learning task**

  Why this task?

  What purpose does it serve?

  Is it set within a bigger context?

- **the learning outcomes**

  How are the skills of listening, negotiating, turn-taking and co-operation supported in this task?

  What new knowledge will students gain? What concepts will they understand? What skills will they develop?

- **grouping students**

  How will teams be formed: randomly, or in pairs, or according to friendship, interest, ability groups? Why?

  Will students have assigned roles?

  How will student roles be defined and designated?

  What will the teacher's role be during the tasks?

- **structuring the environment**

  Time

  How much time is available to complete the task?

  How much warning will students need to pack up?

  Resources

  What needs to be prepared before the task begins?

  Are the resources accessible?

  Physical space

  Are the desks in the way?

  Does each group have sufficient space in which to complete its task?

  Does each group have a designated space?

- **collaborative principles**

  Collaborative atmosphere

  What are the signs that this is a collaborative classroom?

  Do you feel good coming into this classroom?

  Is there a sense of student ownership?

  Is it an orderly classroom where learners are respected?

  Positive interdependence

  How will each person contribute to the task?

  How are individuals assessed?

  How will individuals be encouraged to support one another?

How will the group present to the class?

How will it be possible to identify who has done what?

Social skills

What social skills will you focus upon?

How are social skills built into the task?

What explicit demonstrations of social skills will occur?

Is there a need for an observer to sit outside the task and observe how the team functions?

Interaction

How will the task elicit interaction?

How does the context support interaction?

Processing/Reflecting

How will the process support learning?

How will the content be learned?

How will learners contribute?

- **individual/group accountability**

How will groups know when they have achieved their goal?

How will individuals contribute to the group?

How will groups, and their individual members, evaluate their efforts?

Managing collaborative inquiry

In collaborative classrooms, the emphasis is on having students develop independence, social competence, problem-solving and a sense of purpose. Students need to assume responsibility and shift the focus from the teacher as controller of behaviour to teacher as guide and mentor. The following questions put the emphasis back on the students to make choices about their behaviour and identify the consequences of their actions.

- What are you doing?
- What do you need to be doing?
- What are you going to do after we've had this conversation?
- What is the problem and how can we solve it?
- Is there a better way to complete this task?

Promoting active reflection

Bear in mind that student-collaborators are storying together. It is often valuable to guide them towards jointly constructed recounts of their journey, particularly if they have reached a sticking point in their investigation. This might be couched in the form of a question such as "What is the story so far? Can you trace how you arrived at the point you're at now?"

Such active narrative reconstructions invite participants to step aside from the process in which they have been engaging, from which point they are able to see patterns, causes and effects, points of tension, differing perspectives, and so on. This is not only a way of 'talking through' a problem, it is a way of creating a shared story.

Reflecting on the completed task

Teacher questions to guide reflection

Content

- What do you know now that you didn't know before?
- How does this alter your position?
- How might this information be helpful for a ... (e.g. police officer, astronaut, parent)?
- How might you use this information?
- What might need to change?
- What benefits are there to ...?
- What is your favourite ...?
- What were the most important points? Why?
- What were your conclusions?
- What are the similarities/differences between ...?
- How is ... like a flower/car/orchestra?
- What feeling does ... evoke?
- How do these pictures represent ...?
- Why is ... important to know?
- What new ideas did you learn from your partner/ team?
- What can you do with ...?
- How might your family/ classroom/world be better with ...?
- Why is it important that ...?
- What makes this easy/difficult to solve?
- Which clues helped you to ...?

Process

- What difference did you make in achieving the team goals?
- How can you tell if others are using good listening skills?
- How did you practise being inclusive?
- How might you tell if you were operating as a team?
- What words did your group use to encourage each other?
- What ways did you use to ensure everyone understood: the task? the learning?
- How well was the task shared with the team members?
- How did this task help you learn more about your team?
- How did your team seek clarification about the task?
- What roles did you need within the team task?
- How effective were the team roles?
- How well did your team keep our class agreements?
- How did your team make decisions?
- What social goals would you set now?
- If I were a visitor to the room watching your teamwork, what would impress me?
- How did you care for each other?
- How did you show your team members that you were interested in what they had to say?
- What was the best part of the task?
- What was the most difficult part?
- What skills were needed?

Personal contribution

- What did you learn about yourself in the process?
- What difference did you make to your team?
- What did you hear that changed your way of thinking?
- What role did you play in the team? How did it make you feel?
- What rating would you give your attentive listening? Why?
- What was most difficult for you in this task? Why?
- How do you feel about your team members?
- What was the most uncomfortable part of the process?
- What statements of support/encouragement did you use?
- How did you feel about sharing with your team?
- Would you ever like to ...?
- What feelings developed as you worked with your team?
- How did you share your concerns with the team?
- How did you feel when your ideas were rejected or ignored?
- How could you help your team to see your point more clearly?
- How will the teamwork help you change?
- Were you satisfied with the team product?
- When did you feel most happy in your team?
- How did you feel teaching others?
- How did you feel being taught about ...?
- Were your instructions clear? How might they be improved?

Creative ways to reflect

There are many alternatives to saying "What did you learn today?". Using questions like those above, invite students to respond in one of the following ways – or list some possible alternatives and let them decide.

- concentric circles: a statement is made or a question asked with which students can strongly agree or disagree; students move into the centre of the circle to indicate strong agreement and towards the edge of the circle to signify disagreement
- journal-writing
- illustrated response – 'sketch to stretch'
- mind-mapping
- think-pair-share: students take time to reflect individually, then share their thinking with a partner
- round-robin responses
- three-two-one: three facts learned, two skills acquired.

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Activities for students

Building community

Activity 1

I am ...

Using the following pro forma created by Jeff Newton (2000), have students complete the "I am ..." poem. On completion, have students select a section or all of their poem to read aloud.

I am

1st stanza

I am ...	*(two special characteristics you have)*
I wonder ...	*(something you are curious about)*
I hear ...	*(a sound you can imagine hearing)*
I want ...	*(an actual desire you have)*
I am ...	*(repeat the first line)*

2nd stanza

I pretend ...	*(something you pretend to do or believe)*
I feel ...	*(a feeling you have about something real or imaginary)*
I touch ...	*(something you can imagine touching)*
I worry ...	*(something you worry about)*
I cry ...	*(something that makes you sad)*
I am ...	*(repeat the first line)*

3rd stanza

I understand ...	*(something you know is true)*
I say ...	*(something you believe in)*
I dream ...	*(something you dream about)*
I try ...	*(something you make an effort to do)*
I hope ...	*(something you hope for)*
I am ...	*(repeat first line)*

Activity 2

Creating a community

Have students complete the following survey of class members. One name should be written next to each item on the list.

Whose birthday is in the same month as yours?
Who plays soccer?
Who spent their last holidays at their grandparents' house?
Who has travelled overseas?
Who was born overseas?
Who has a baby brother or sister?
Who is the oldest child in their family?
Who plays the piano?
Who had rice for dinner last night?
Who likes to sing under the shower?
Who has brown eyes?
Who likes bananas?
Who catches a bus to school?
Who likes to spend the weekend riding a bike?

Design your own questionnaire based on the variety of interests that you uncover about the students in your classroom.

Activity 3

Five alive

On the first day of school, distribute a brown paper bag to students and ask them to fill it with five small items from their home that they feel say something special about who they are. The items could be things that they use or things that represent an interest. Each day for five days, students gather in a sharing circle, remove one item from the bag and share its meaning with the class.

Activity 4

Fact or fiction

Provide small groups with a set of ten cards relating to a particular theme. The cards consist of true and untrue statements about a particular topic. Each group systematically goes through the cards and decides whether the statements are true or false. Two piles are made. Discuss when all groups have completed the task.

Valuing difference

Activity 1

A little-known fact

Students write about some aspect of their lives that they think that very few people know about – for example, a holiday, an adventure, an achievement. They describe this aspect briefly. As a between-lesson activity (at the start or end of the day), select one of the little-known facts to read to the class. The students listen to the description, then try to guess whose fact has been shared. Each guess should come with a reason for making the choice. After three incorrect guesses, the owner of the fact reveals who they are. The owner of the fact is given time to describe the topic in more detail.

Activity 2

Point of view

- Read *Seven Blind Mice* (Young, 1992).
- Ask:
  - – Whose story is told?

- What does this book have to tell us about a learning community?
- Why did the mice tell different stories?

Activity 3

Read *Seedfolks* (Fleischman, 1997). This is the story of a vacant lot, rat-infested and filled with garbage. It is transformed into a community garden that links the stories of a neighbourhood of strangers. Thirteen very different voices – old, young, Haitian, Hispanic, tough, haunted and hopeful – tell a story of friendship and boundaries crossed.

Activity 4

An accent on stories

Share different versions of a similar story. There are multiple cultural perspectives on fairy stories such as 'Cinderella' (of which it is estimated there are over 500 variations), including:

- Climo, S (1993) *The Korean Cinderella.* HarperCollins, Mexico.
- Grimm Brothers (1981) *Cinderella*. Greenwillow Books, New York.
- Hickox, R (1999) *The Golden Sandal: A Middle Eastern Cinderella Story*. Holiday House, New York.
- Huck, C (1989) *Princess Furball.* Greenwillow Books, New York.
- Louie, A (1982) *Yeh-Shen: A Cinderella Story from China*. Philomel Books, New York.

In small groups, students work through a version of the story and complete the story element comparison chart (over).

	Version 1	Version 2	Version 3
Title			
Characters			
Setting			
Plot			
Theme			
Other differences			

Activity 5

Dialogue journals

Dialogue journals are written conversations in which students and teachers communicate on a regular basis. Students write as much as they choose and the teacher writes back, responding to questions and/or introducing new topics. The concluding comment could be in the form of a question that leaves the student with a starting point for their next response. Dialogue journals provide an excellent, non-threatening opportunity to interact with a proficient English speaker.

Activity 6

The first stories

Direct students to any of the following websites to enable them to explore Indigenous Australian perspectives.

Australian story list
http://www.dreamtime.net.au/dreaming/storylist.htm

Aboriginal stories of beliefs/religion
http://www.beliefnet.com/story/76/story_7655_l.html

Indigenous Australia
http://www.dreamtime.net.au/dreaming/index.htm

Children's stories from the dawn of time
http://www.islandnet.com/~bidjigal/tales/

Bibliography of children's books by and about Aboriginal people
http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/pr/lib/bib/nofcn_e.html

Bamapama's New Dream
http://www.beliefnet.com/story

Koobar the Koala and Water
http://www.planetozkids.com/oban/koala.htm

How Kangaroo Got His Tail
http://www.planetozkids.com/oban/kanga.htm

Kangaroo Gets a Pouch
http://www.planetozkids.com/oban/kanpouch.htm

Bibunbay – children's exhibition
http:www.jamadreaming.com/au/bibunbay/bibunbay.htm

Australian Aboriginal writers
http://home.vicnet.net.au/~ozlit/aboowrits.html

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6

It's in the telling: Enacting stories

As we have seen elsewhere in this book, not all stories are told. Often, they are internally constructed and 'filed' into memory as part of a metanarrative, or a number of metanarratives, that operate in learners' lives. This chapter, however, will focus on sharing and celebrating stories. It will look particularly at narration in the oral mode, giving thought both to presentation and reception of stories.

Oral story-telling supports literacy learning in three important ways. It:

- refines talking and listening skills
- increases interest in reading and writing
- supports writing by aiding the process of composing.

Refining talking and listening

Robert, a Year 1 teacher, has reconfigured the regular news time in his classroom so that it now takes the form of sharing circles. He explains that "Students are allocated to small groups. These change every four weeks. My groups are kept to a maximum of four. The only rule is that everyone in the group is required to say something. I allow twenty minutes. Five minutes before the time is up, I remind the groups to check that everyone has had an opportunity to say something. The informal conversations and the swapping of tales often leads to writing. I couldn't see the point of news time when only one student got to speak while everyone sat there and pretended that they were interested. It seemed to me that it was always the same students with the same things to say. The rest seemed to be reluctant, or felt they had nothing to say. News time didn't really meet the needs of many in the class, and didn't provide opportunities for them to speak on a regular basis." In Robert's class, sharing circles allowed students to:

- become part of, and participate in, a community
- link their out-of-school experiences and their school experiences
- speak before a group
- make the transition into writing
- identify writing topics grounded in experience.

After 15 years of teaching, Patrice, a Year 5 teacher, came to the realisation that freeing up five minutes in the morning gave her students time to talk to each other. Up to that point, she had always felt anxious about making sure that she had organised their time. She began to see the benefits of relinquishing control and allowing them to share their stories. "What I began to notice was that they were communicating with each other, telling each other stories; giving them time to chat really made a difference when I wanted their attention. They were ready to listen."

Katherine, a Year 2 teacher, recognised the importance of sharing stories in order to create a non-threatening environment. "It was essential to produce a sense of community. Once students realised that their opinions were going to be valued rather than judged, they were much more willing to tell their stories and try out various reading and writing situations."

Increasing interest in reading and writing

> *The word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language ... (it is not, after all, out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his words) but rather it exists in other people's mouths ... serving other people's intentions; it is from there that one must take the word and make it one's own.*
>
> – Bakhtin, 1981:26

Oral story-telling invites creative language use and vocabulary growth. Through presenting and receiving stories, students come to understand and acquire new words in meaningful contexts. Cindy's Year 2 students, for example, became so intrigued with the word 'gargantuan' (as an alternative to 'big') that they continued to experiment with it in their own writing. Through story-telling, students also experience familiar words in new contexts.

Students need to play with language and innovate on familiar stories. Recently, I overheard a teacher warning her class not to use other people's ideas in their writing. I had to wonder what 'other ideas' there were. We all constantly retell stories; in terms of language development, it is a positive step when students make use of the language and language patterns of the stories they hear. "One way of appreciating a story", says Rosen (1987:19), "is to tell the same story or one very like it." This process builds students' recognition of the conventional structural and language features of narratives, strengthening the nexus between reading, responding and composing.

Supporting writing by aiding the process of composing

> *The children in my class tell stories on a regular basis and this, I noticed, sparked their interest in writing. When a student who is language and speech delayed and has no confidence in himself looks up at you in the hallway, first thing in the morning, and says "Ms Wills, I know what I am going to write about today" and proceeds to tell you his story, it is an incredible feeling. At that moment, I realised that telling stories and writing awakened a passion in this child that he did not know that he had.*
>
> – Tina, Year 2 teacher

When students discover the love of story-telling and language, the enthusiasm with which they approach learning is enhanced. For Tina, seeing Tim's reaction reinforced the importance of using oral rehearsals to support writing. In Tina's class, students orally rehearse their stories prior to writing. They discuss with each other what they are going to write about, then ask each other questions. This reminds them of the details of events, the descriptions that are necessary for meaning to be conveyed and the sense of order necessary. They relive the events, and their stories come alive. The feedback from their oral rehearsals aids their writing, as listeners point out, among other things:

- omissions relating to who, what, when, where, why
- descriptions requiring clarification
- sequencing requiring reorganisation

and offer suggestions to improve the narrative drama, humour, tension etc.[°]

[°] The relationship between reading, critical questioning and composing is elaborated in the PETA book *Exploring How Texts Work* (Derewianka, 1990).

Presenting stories

Words from a storyteller

Professional storyteller Phyllis McDuff (2001) claims that the powerful storyteller honours three sacred duties:

> *Storytellers have a deep trust of themselves in their storytelling role, offering no excuses, no inhibitions, no distortions. They tell their stories well so that the wisdom of the story reaches their audience.*
>
> *A storyteller creates a safe place for the story. In creating a safe place, the teller will demonstrate respect for the story, allocating time, quiet, comfort, and a well-chosen physical environment as well as reverence for culture and emotions raised so that the story comes alive and touches the audience.*
>
> *The storyteller chooses material that has wisdom; the audience is enriched.*

Used with permission.

The teacher as teller: Tips for success

Work your way into it.

- Notice how you tell stories in your everyday life.
- Start by using intonation and expression when reading aloud.
- Folk and fairy tales are often the easiest stories to begin with. Start collecting them.

Be selective.

- Choose to read and tell stories that excite you.
- Consider the audience: How old are they likely to be?

How long is a reasonable amount of time to have them sit and listen? How comfortable is the venue? Are the story's messages and themes appropriate?

Craft it.

Take ownership of the telling:

- Select a story that appeals to you.
- Read it at least twice.
- Manipulate the story to suit your personality and style of presentation.
- Take opportunities for rehearsal. Try video- or audio-taping yourself. Another approach worth trying is to fold a piece of paper into eight squares and map out the eight significant events, with key words, that add flavour to the story. Use these landmarks to guide your telling.

Get a clear image of the story.

- What is the purpose of this story – the message that needs to be conveyed?
- Imagine the setting: What does it look like? What are the colours, sights, sounds, smells and other sensations?
- Imagine the characters: How do they dress? How do they move? How do they relate to one another? What motivates them? What do their voices sound like?
- Memorise the first sentence. Say it out loud.
- Memorise the last sentence. Say it out loud.
- Walk yourself through the story silently.
- Refer back to the source of the story: Did you remember the sequence of events? What did you forget?
- Reread the story.

Say it out loud to yourself.

"RRAAR!" ROARED THE GIANT...
NOT BAD.. LET ME REFLECT ON THAT.

- Keep telling the story out loud until you are so familiar with it that it seems like an old friend.
- Try out miniature versions of your story by sneaking it into conversations. The more you do this, the more the story matures and gains substance.

Plan your presentation.

- Make a plan to tell your story. Who will be your audience?
- Do you need any props? (If so, keep them to a minimum and use expressive suggestion instead.)
- Don't fight against nervousness – feel it and recognise it for what it is, and it will subside. It often helps to announce that you don't have much experience with oral story-telling and that you feel nervous. Articulating your nervousness may move the feelings 'outside' of you and allow the job to be done.

Create a receptive environment.

Bear in mind the lasting impact of stories that you have heard. You now stand to make an impact on the lives of the gathered listeners. The story may be remembered long after the telling has ceased.

- Find a location where you won't be interrupted.
- Check that your audience is comfortable and ready to listen.
- Take control of the comfort of the group; if someone needs to move closer, or is sitting outside the group, invite them in. If the audience is spread out or distant, invite them closer so that an intimate environment is created.
- Check to see that all hearers are within your vision.
- Make sure there is a sense of togetherness as the story is about to begin. Check that you are comfortable. With younger students, it is often best to sit as close as possible to their eye level. In this way they can be drawn into the dramatics of the story through your facial expressions.
- Create a good listening environment; surround the story with silence before commencing.
- Maintain eye contact. Don't flit from one person to the next, but maintain lingering eye contact across the whole group. In doing so, you will create the impression that this story is directed at each and every individual.
- Observe yourself in the process – imagine yourself watching from a corner of the room. What needs to change? What is working?
- Read your audience; pace the story according to their responses.
- Use gesture and facial expressions as the story unfolds.
- Co-opt the audience into the story by encouraging them to be actively involved.
- Concentrate fully on the story. Operate from the present moment.
- Enjoy what you do, and do it with passion.

Students as tellers: How to promote oral narration

The PETA book *Children as Storytellers* (Mallan (ed.), 1991) remains an excellent source of guidance for the teacher aiming to empower students to explore and relate oral narratives.

Students should be encouraged to tell their stories using the process outlined for the teacher above. Less experienced tellers should attempt to build their stories around simple sequences. To assist young storytellers to stay focused and move the narrative along, visual prompts showing the sequence of events or props (no more than five) could be used. Once they are able to exercise control over a simple narrative structure, students should be supported in building richness and density to their imagery (for example through adjectival clusters) and tension to the telling (for example by foreshadowing events that may happen, introducing complications that hearers will want resolved).

An important aspect of story-telling in the classroom is that all students should be prepared to listen, and that the environment should be structured to support the telling. I often mark on the carpet (using chalk that brushes off easily) a simple semi-circle in which the storyteller sits or stands. The audience is instructed to surround the story in silence; the teller does not commence until everyone is prepared to listen. Restricting the telling to, say, five minutes is one way of making sure that the audience is comfortable and the story is well prepared. Use one of the students to be the time-keeper, and be consistent in limiting time. As the students become more proficient at story-telling, time allocations might increase.

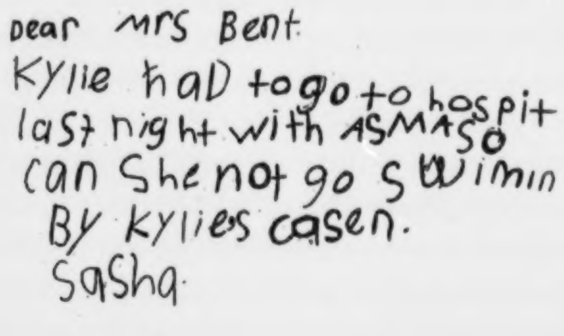
Story-telling props could include a storyteller's candle, which burns while a story is told. The lights could be dimmed. Alternatively, move outside the classroom and have students sit under a parachute to enclose the space while someone shares a story. Creating a magical storyteller's chair adds a special glamour to the telling.

Consider taping students' stories and burning them onto a CD that could be sold to parents and community members as an end-of-year gift. Compiling written versions of the stories creates valuable texts for students to read along with their peers. It is also an opportunity for students to reflect upon the differences between oral and written modes, for example the different ways in which things such as emphasis, illustration and structure are realised.

Responding to stories

What to expect

Some stories demand to be told, and students can be very persistent in meeting that demand. Kylie, for example, had tried to convince her classroom teacher on three consecutive mornings that going to swimming lessons was not her preferred option. She created a gamut of reasons to support her views. Then, on the fourth day, she produced the culminating story. She presented her teacher with a crumpled piece of paper justifying her non-attendance – she hoped!



Dear mrs Bent
Kylie haD to go to hospit
last night with ASMA so
can She not go Swimin
By kylies casen.
Sasha.

Boys, girls and stories

The learning attributes that may be assigned to boys and girls continue to be much discussed and much contested. In looking briefly at contemporary research into gender and patterns of talk, the section under aims to alert teachers to tendencies that might emerge in the classroom. It does not invite teachers to accept these patterns as 'natural', nor does it attempt to answer how such patterns may be socially constructed. It may simply be said that all learners draw upon unique resources when constructing stories, and that all research is inevitably sited in contexts that are not universal. Clearly, the stories in which our students participate contribute to the ways in which they shape their identities, including their gender identities.

According to Wolfe (2001), most researchers have found that male students tend to speak more often than female students in Grades K-12 – sometimes at a ratio of 3:1. A similar pattern in interactions, they suggest, continues into adulthood.

Work by Nicolopoulou et al. (1994) focuses on the ways in which four-year-olds represent society and social relationships. They found that boys and girls systematically and consistently chose different subject matter and employed different narrative structure and symbolic imagination. Girls' stories showed a strain towards order, while the boys' stories tended towards disorder. According to Nicolopoulou et al. (1994), Allen and Bradley (1993) and Fiese and Skillman (2000), the following contrastive characteristics predominate.

Characteristics of girls' stories

- Have a coherent plot with a stable set of characters and continuous plot line.
- Build narrative coherence by structuring the content around stable sets of social relationships, especially family relationships.
- Introduce a cast of characters carefully selected in terms of kinship relationships.
- Recount the rhythmic, cyclical and repeated patterns of the everyday domestic family life.

- Have a sense of formal symmetry – characters come in twos.

> *Once upon a time there was a little girl who went into the woods and met a wolf that was close to her house. Then a bear ate her mum and dad and they dies. Then she grew up and she and her husband lived happily ever after.*
>
> – Sara (4)

Characteristics of boys' stories

- Tend towards disorder, often stringing dramatic and powerful images and events juxtaposed in loose association.
- Lack stable characters and well articulated plots.
- Are marked by movement and disruption and, often, by associative chains of exuberant imagery.
- Portray characters as big, powerful, and often deliberately frightening.
- Depict active violence.

> *Once there was a rescue hero that wanted to rescue the whole city, but there was no bad guys in the city. So her decided that he would test how he fought, but he wasn't tough enough. So he got more plumper, but then one guy was too big for him so he losed. The end.*
>
> – Ben (4)

Both boys' and girls' stories centre around danger and the conflicts of life. How they approach these issues may vary considerably. Girls may tend to neutralise the disruptive elements (for example, reunite the family); boys may be more content with unresolved conflict or disorder.

What to do

Build on success

At the end of a story presentation, take time to point out its strengths. Acknowledging students for some positive aspect of the story is essential. It could also be the first step that enables them to see themselves as competent text composers, and perhaps change their perceptions of themselves as communicators. Teacher comments at this point might be along the lines of: "I like how you used your facial expression to draw the audience in"; "I like how your voice got louder as the climax of the story was building"; "I like how your hands remained behind your back and you leaned forward to begin your story. It created a real sense of mystery."

It is wise to limit your suggestions to one area in which the student could seek to improve (and to suggest some ways in which that improvement could be pursued).

Identify the features of successful models

There is a something of a paradox underlying language learning. On the one hand, teachers support students to construct *resistant* texts – texts that do not appear to be constructed; texts that appear, in a sense, as if they could not be realised any other way. This is certainly the idea that lies behind the careful construction, rehearsal and refinement of oral story presentations. In general terms, we place high value on the seamless engagement of the text with the audience (and this is indeed one important motivation for students to place value upon spelling, punctuation and layout conventions in written texts).

On the other hand, teachers support students to deconstruct texts critically – to expose their structural and language features so that the workings of successful texts can be understood as well as appreciated. It is through such a process that students can find models to emulate or innovate upon (as well as challenge or contest what texts present).

We can reflect on the value of successful models by considering two texts. *One Big Happy Family* (Thompson & Carter, 2002) is a text likely to appeal to readers with a preference for themes around the family – its relationships, its doings, its evolution. The text is conventionally sequenced and is resolved in terms that affirm the stability of the nuclear family. In other words, it represents themes that predominate in stories related by young girls (see p 111). Yet the text could serve as a good model for young storytellers who may need to understand the value of dynamism and disruption. In it, the family (which includes a large cast of animals) expands in a steadily more chaotic way as the pages turn. Disaster then strikes, in the form of Granny, who moves in. Among other traumas, the stoic Granny is fed cockroaches, which she cannot identify due to her failing eyesight.

At face value, *I Got a Rocket!* (Zurbo & Gorissen, 1997) appears to be a text likely to appeal to readers with a disposition towards eccentricity, randomness, explosive action and reckless danger. The possessiveness suggested by the title is realised in the text, along with extroverted behaviour and competitive peer relationships. In this sense, it represents themes that predominate in stories told by young boys (see p 112). Yet the text demonstrates strong organisational features, with a logically sequenced structure that places the protagonist (and his rocket) in a contrastive relationship to his peer community. It is also a text that is resolved with a strong statement of family connection and stability.

Both of these books are for younger readers, but similar models exist for readers at all levels. The point of the above examples is this: students can almost always be introduced to texts that appeal to them – texts that tell the kinds of stories that they, too, would like to tell. By using such models, the teacher can demonstrate certain features of successful narratives that may not be highly valued or practised by the student.

Enable peer scaffolding and critical support

Student storytellers benefit from the ideas, models, support and suggestions of their peers. At various points in a teaching-learning cycle, it might be beneficial to employ different student groupings. An ideas-generation activity, for example, might best be done among self-selected groups of friends. Rehearsal activities, on the other hand, might work well in mixed-ability groups in which the modelling and support of more capable students is available to less capable students. Mixed-gender groups might be considered in order to provide students with feedback that challenges their assumptions about what will interest and satisfy the audience.

Audience evaluations can build confidence and provide a basis for further refinement. For example, following a story presentation, students in an audience might complete a pro forma response that requires them to identify good things about the presentation ("I liked the way you ...", "My favourite part was ...") and provide suggestions for improvement ("I think this story would be even better if ...").

Reflect on the process and product

Audience evaluations, as described above, provide one good basis for student reflection upon story presentations. Middle- and upper-primary students might also benefit from self-evaluating the effectiveness of their stories against a set of criteria such as: success of each *stage* of the narrative (e.g. orientation, complication, resolution); success of *descriptions* (e.g. characterisation, setting); success of the *communication* (e.g. engagement, tension, humour, logic and sequencing).

Students should also be supported to reflect upon the language requirements of the story-telling task. Jones (1996) points to the mode continuum as a means of reflecting upon language, with 'spoken-like' language at one end of the continuum, and 'written-like' language at the other. Students could use this idea to look at the kind of language they were required to use in: formulating their story; presenting their story orally; presenting their story in writing.

Activities for students

Activity 1

Story skeletons

- In pairs, students randomly select a sentence from two separate texts. They then construct a story around the sentences.

or

- Read the beginning of a story and the end of another. Students make up the middle to connect the two sections.

or

- Students randomly select two or three words from a newspaper or magazine. In groups of four, they construct a story that incorporates each word.

or

- Distribute everyday items to the students – a different item for each. Include such things as a tea bag, coin, clock, feather, necklace, cake of soap, shoelace, set of kitchen tongs, flower, can opener, small box. Arrange the students in randomly selected groups of four. Each group uses its items to construct a story. Each item must be incorporated within the story but does not have to maintain its correct function (for example, the can opener could be a space-age helicopter). Each group presents its story to the class.

Activity 2

A life lived, waiting to be told

- Arrange for students to collect oral stories from people in retirement homes. Students write and publish each story and give it back to the original teller as a gift.
- Collect oral histories of people in the community who have stories relating to the topics being investigated in classrooms.

Activity 3

Travel broadens the mind

Tap into memories: play relaxing music and have students sit with their eyes closed. Let their minds wander to whichever places the music might suggest. Let them sit quietly with their images as you gently remind them to stay with their thoughts and look for details of their imagined location. The students then open their eyes and, in small groups, share stories about the experience. This activity could form the basis for descriptive writing that could focus on adjectival construction of sound, sight, smell, touch, taste or emotional response.

* Activity 4

Realising a vision

Use picture books and news reports to explore the relationship between spoken or written text and supporting visuals. How do the visuals represent the content of the text? How do they add information? How might they contradict or challenge the text? How might they make words unnecessary? Then ask students to develop illustrations, using PowerPoint or overhead transparencies, to accompany their stories and aid in the telling. Students might also explore ways of representing their stories in a predominantly visual mode, e.g. through film storyboarding or cartooning. This could be conducted alongside investigations into other forms of visual/literal representation such as hieroglyphics or Chinese characters.

Useful websites

www.storyteller.net
Information about story-telling, tellers and events

www.yellowmoon.com
Online bookstore for story-telling books and tapes

http://members.optusnet.com.au/~dbelling/index.html
Storyteller Daryll Bellingham; includes useful links

www.home.aone.net.au/stories/
Information and resources from the Australian Storytelling Guild

Story-starting sources

www.knownet.net/~ackley/paragraph/story_start.html
www.highlands.vic.edu.au/branches/storystarters.htm
http://members.shaw.ca/newlife/Writing/storystarter.htm
www.dramaplus.org/story1.htm
http://teacher.scholastic.com/lessonrepro/lessonplans/ect/curric1297a.htm

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What's the story?

making meaning in primary classrooms

For every individual, stories are one of the earliest and most enduring ways of sharing and constructing meaning. Narrative schemes, overt and hidden, are at work in all children's lives as they try to connect new information and concepts with their existing understandings. They are also at work in primary classrooms in ways both small (an individual story told) and large (a community story in process). Packed with insights and fresh ideas, **What's the Story?** explores the central place of 'storying' in classroom learning.

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